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THE CORNHILL



No. 1002

Winter 1954/55

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JOHN MURRAY, 50 ALBEMARLE STREET, LONDON, W.1

At present the CORNHILL appears quarterly and will publish occasional Supplements containing work of up to 35,000 words in length.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

VALENTINE LAWFORD entered the Diplomatic Service in 1934, was successively Assistant Private Secretary to Lord Halifax, Sir Anthony Eden and the late Mr. Ernest Bevin. He attended the Moscow, Quebec and Yalta Conferences, was appointed to the United Kingdom Delegation to the United Nations in 1946, Political Counsellor to the Embassy in Teheran in 1949, acting twice as *Chargé d'Affaires*. He left the Service in 1950 and now lives in the United States.

WILLIAM SANSOM, novelist and short-story writer. His most recent books are *The Face of Innocence*, *A Touch of the Sun* (collected short stories), *Pleasures Strange and Simple*, *A Bed of Roses*, and his new book of prose ballads *Lord Love Us* (Hogarth Press).

RICHARD CHURCH, poet, novelist, critic, literary adviser, was a civil servant for many years and his trilogy of novels *The Porch*, *The Stronghold*, *The Room Within* (Dent) which won the Femina Vie Heureuse Prize, gives a portrait of Civil Service life. *Collected Poems* were published in 1948. These episodes of childhood in Battersea, adapted for this issue of the CORNHILL, will form part of his autobiography *Under the Bridge* to be published by Heinemann next year. They provide an interesting contrast to the account of Osbert Lancaster's childhood in Holland Park published in the 1000th issue.

ETIENNE AMYOT, musician, writer, lecturer, broadcaster, has made extensive tours in Europe and America as a concert pianist. He was the first to undertake the planning of the B.B.C. Third Programme after the War.

ROBIN FEDDEN was brought up in France on the river Seine between Paris and Rouen. 'Mademoiselle Firmin' will play a part in his semi-autobiography which is in progress. His published works include *As the Unicorn*, a novel (Macmillan), *Suicide* (Peter Davies), *The Land of Egypt* (Batsford), *Syria* (Robert Hale), *Crusader Castles* (Art and Technics).

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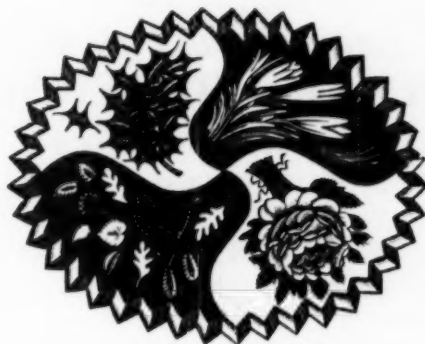
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King of Kings

BY VALENTINE LAWFORD

A FEW weeks after I arrived at the Tehran Embassy in the summer of 1949, as political Counsellor, the Ambassador told me that I must be taken to see the Shah. He said it half jovially, but half reverently as well; and it was not long before I became conscious that in the eyes of virtually all my British colleagues, I would now take the first step upward in the direction that they all, for their unspoken reasons, wished me to go. Even those who might privately have resented my superior status, being worthier as well as older than I, and far more experienced, seemed to welcome my introduction into a sphere to which they rarely penetrated. It was as though they hoped that it would enrich my store of wisdom and, if only metaphorically, increase my age. Others, whom I suspected of harbouring ambitions that it was still a little early in their careers, however brilliantly satisfactory, to indulge to the full, honoured me with the polite envy of bridesmaids at a fashionable wedding, confident that with luck one day their turn would come. Half humorous references to 'when you see H.I.M.' betrayed a vicarious interest even on the part of a member of the subordinate staff whom I had noted down (and slightly respected) as a potential revolutionary.

Sir John le Rougetel had been summoned home to attend a conference of all the British representatives in the Middle East; and he had sought and obtained permission to take me with him to the palace on the visit which he was to pay to the Shah before he left, so that if in his absence the Shah should wish to send for me or the British Government think fit to instruct me to ask for an audience, he would at least know who I was.

It was only natural that I should know who he was. So far as his physical attributes went, I could have described, I thought, most

King of Kings

of the lines of his face ; his large nose and mouth and eyes, and the contours of his dark, curly hair, parted above the middle of the forehead. I knew that he had impressed Churchill, some years before, by his youthful seriousness and grasp of affairs ; that by the world at large (which likes its public figures in black and white, with as few half-tones as possible) he was regarded as a friend of the West ; that he was a keen (some said a rash) motorist and airman ; that he had been happily, and then unhappily, married to an Egyptian princess of great beauty whom I had once, when I was a Secretary of Embassy in Paris and she a small schoolgirl, escorted from the train at the Gare Saint Lazare with her mother, Queen Nazli, and a trio of little sisters. King Fuad's four young daughters had all looked alike. They had all been dressed alike. And their names all began with an F. In short, I knew as much about the Shah as some people might know about a movie star.

I had already seen him once since my arrival in Tehran, at an evening party which he was giving at Sa'adabad for King Abdulla of Jordan. In a dark blue uniform with a great many orders, he had stood on the steps of the palace, watching the fireworks which usage decreed should be part of the entertainment of state visitors to Iran. A few months before that, he had been shot in the face and shoulder on the steps of Tehran University ; and not many months later, in the courtyard of the Mosque of Omar, it was to be the turn of wise, old, monkey-faced Abdulla-ibn-Hussein. In the meantime they had to watch fireworks. And so, alas, did the rest of us, even those who not being Heads of Mission, had only been invited after the banquet was over, with white ties and decorations (if we had any). As we stood there, someone whispered in my ear that the evening had been marked by one of those incidents which in a capital like Tehran give the Diplomatic Corps a topic of conversation for days. Irena Wiley, the wife of the American Ambassador, had lit a cigarette at the table before the end of dinner, some said even before the first course had been served and, all agreed, before the Shah himself. But though she might have scandalised an Ambassador or two, it is doubtful whether she had deeply shocked the Shah. At least, as he stood at the head of the white stairs, and the rockets and Roman candles occasionally lit up his large features, I saw no trace

of shock. Only now and then a look of very human boredom, which he had been relying on the darkness to conceal.

In the summer months the Persian Court, like everyone else in Tehran who had the means, withdrew to the region loosely known as Shimran, a continuation of the ever-growing suburbs above Gulhek, beneath the Shimran Kuh, which constituted in that direction the first approach to the high mountains of the Elburz chain. The members of the Imperial Family occupied a series of palaces, or villas, scattered in the shady park of Sa'adabad, between the little town of Tajrish, which is Persia's version of Saint-Cloud, and the towering peaks that rise up, golden and arid all day, deceptively soft and violet at dusk, almost immediately to the north.

On the morning of the audience, as I drove up the Gulhek road with the Ambassador, well before the appointed time, it was already insufferably hot. Each in a blue suit, with our hats balanced on our knees, we sat in the back of the Embassy Rolls-Royce, *recueillis*, as the French put it, or, as one might say in English, like decent people on the way to church: and as motionless as we could be, for the slightest twitch of the body provoked perspiration. Mercifully the Shah did not require us to wear a tail coat. In front of us sat Ismail, the Ambassador's Adenese chauffeur, who had originally found his way to Tehran in the service of the Sheikh of Mohammerah, a potentate from the Gulf whom Riza Shah had kept in honourable captivity in the capital. One of the Embassy footmen crouched by his side, a diminutive Persian figure in the white summer uniform that they all loved, for the status that it conferred on them in contrast to their ragged, dust-laden compatriots on the road. Between the pair, at what seemed some distance downhill, miraculously threading its way among the overloaded donkeys and lurching waggons that still formed the bulk of the traffic of Persia's metropolis, the Union Jack with the Ambassadorial wreath fluttered reassuringly before us in the wind, contriving somehow, as the Union Jack will, to place in its proper perspective the disturbing world beyond. In his own mind, I am sure, Ismail the elegant and plausible saw himself as a similar reassurance, a second line of defence, against the lesser breeds without the law. 'Persiyans silly peepil, sir,' he loved to say, comfortingly; and his liquid, Anglo-Indian accents almost succeeded in conveying

King of Kings

the erroneous impression that we still lived in the golden days of the officer class. It was perhaps unfortunate that he drove quite so fast. But we rocked and swayed with confidence, knowing that he was reliable so long as he was not under the influence of alcohol, which was rarely before sundown.

A mile above Gulhek the avenue widened into a square, the market-place of Tajrish ; to a foreign eye little more than a line of ramshackle, blue-painted shop-fronts with awnings, around a bad piece of road. At the near end was the local droshky-stand, men, horses and hooded carriages in varying stages of picturesque decrepitude, waiting, incredible as it might seem, for members of the public to entrust themselves to the triple risk of their combined services.

From the market-place the road led upwards between trees and walls, curving with such violence that the tyres of the Rolls-Royce squealed. The Ambassador was momentarily silent, assembling as I guessed in some distant corridor of his labyrinthine mind the little troop of familiar ideas that he would shortly have to trot out for the Shah's inspection (there never seemed anything new to say these days) or perhaps memorising a happy phrase or two to put the young man at his ease from the outset.

At the top of the hill, on the left, there was a gateway in the high stone wall, flanked by sentry-boxes. A few soldiers stood in the road, and an officer of the guard, recognising the car, came forward to salute us and at the same time prevent us from trying to drive through the gate. Ismail knew the rules, but on this as on all subsequent occasions he first made as if to enter, so grievously did it irk his ultra-British soul that not even his Ambassador should be permitted to approach the palace otherwise than on foot. The *ghulam* hopped down and opened the door of the car ; Ismail joined him and there they stood, cap in hand, awaiting further orders, though they knew that none were needed. As we walked away, accompanied by the officer, our two servants bowed like willows over a brook, conscious that the more obsequiousness they displayed, the greater must be our importance and in consequence their own. The greater too the enormity of the injustice done to us and to them and the British Empire in making us walk a hundred yards in that heat.

For a brief space the drive was tree-shaded, but we soon emerged

into the full glare of the sun. There were wide lawns on either side of us and sprinklers playing like iridescent fountains haphazardly disposed on the grass. In high summer only beggars and courtiers would walk at such an hour ; but happily the drive was a short one. I only just had time to note that like everyone else who tried to cultivate flowers in Persia the Shah's gardeners wisely limited themselves to the local trinity : geranium, petunia, rose.

Tucked away on the right, halfway down a slope, was a small villa where the Shah slept, and worked when he was alone. But he received his guests in a larger, white house at the end of the drive. Behind it was a square swimming-pool surrounded by plane-trees and towards the mountains a hard tennis court. Hormuz Pirnia, a court official who had been to school at Harrow, met the Ambassador at the foot of the steps and sat with us for a while in an ante-chamber. It was always agreeable to talk to Hormuz Pirnia. Though he never said anything that one could remember afterwards, he had a suave, almost Foreign Office manner. And for the senior members of the British Embassy he reserved a special blend of comradeship and gratitude ; as well he might, for they almost alone in all Persia were capable of recognising his Old Harrovian tie.

When the Shah was ready for us we were led into a drawing-room. He was standing at the far end of it and came forward to greet the Ambassador. We bowed at the door of the room, and again over his hand. Then we all sat down, in armchairs. Almost immediately, a servant came in with tea. He bowed too and moved respectfully around ; but though he behaved with an air of deference towards the Shah it was only by twisting one's imagination to the utmost that one could recognise in this modest, rather ordinary-looking young king the successor of an almost endless line of picturesque, holy terrors. Superficially there was nothing but his florid title of Shahinshah, and the preconceived awe that it induced in the minds of the millions who did not happen to know him, to connect him with his predecessors of the last century and a half, not to mention the line of kings of kings stretching back into the sanguinary mists of ancient history. Since it is to the Shahs of the Qajar dynasty that the world owes its conception of the attributes of Persian royalty, it was only natural to compare his simplicity with their stylised magnificence ; with Fath

King of Kings

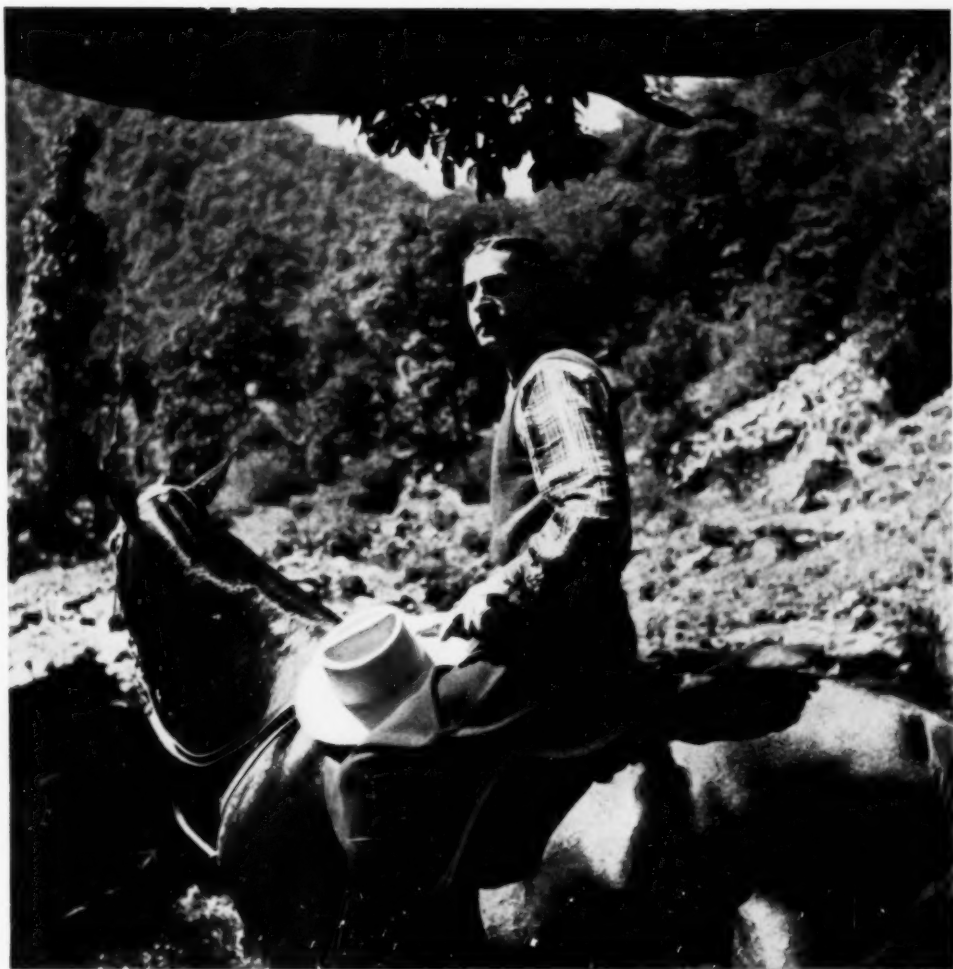
Ali Shah, jewelled and plumed, houri-eyed and fabulously bearded, swaying like a cobra among cushions sewn with pearls ; Nasr-ed-Din Shah, the military beau with scythe-shaped moustaches ; and the torpid, or corpulent, frock-coated figures of the last Shahs of the line. Yet he seemed almost equally far removed from his own father, the irascible, dynamic, snow-capped Cossack whose whips and riding-boots, so the story went, had been more often applied to the backs and buttocks of lazy and dishonest Ministers than to those of the occupants of the Imperial stables.

Mohammad Riza Shah's European clothes were well-cut, but unpretentious. He wore a dark suit, a wrist-watch and a ring, and when he smoked a cigarette he used a small, black and gold holder. His manners were gentle, his speech matter of fact. Though he listened more than he held forth, it was clear from the expression of his features that he was utterly lacking in the quality of craftiness, which had marked his predecessors, almost without exception, since the world began.

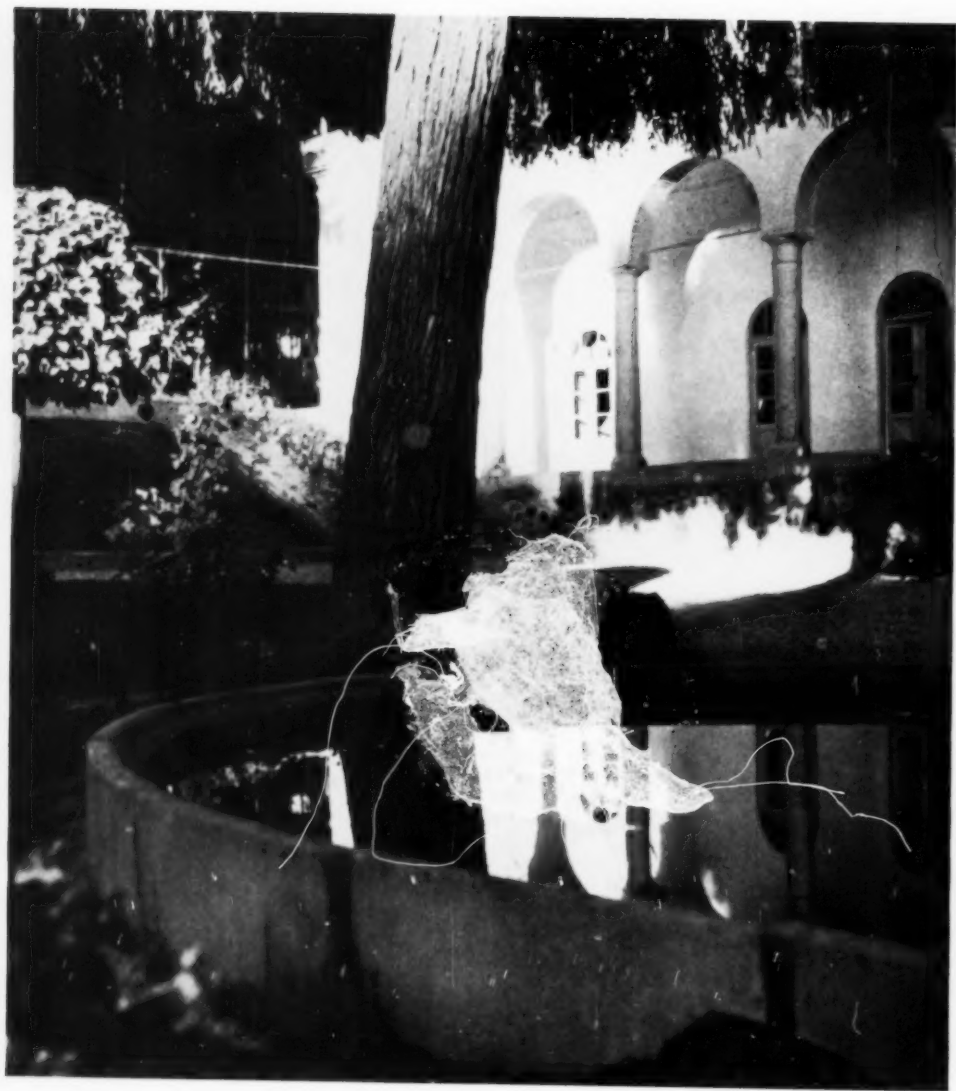
As for the British Ambassador and his political Counsellor, calmly sauntering into the royal presence in our drab, blue suits, a little shiny at the elbows, and our black shoes covered with dust from the drive, with a couple of perfunctory nods of the head ; how proletarianised and watered down we should have seemed to our own predecessors of scarcely more than a hundred years before, Sir Harford Jones and Mr. Morier. Feeling more rare and distinguished than in this century it was conceivable that we should do, they had had to wait for the Grand Vizier to convey to his master their humble request to approach the dust of His Majesty's Feet ; and even when the royal permission had been granted, they would not have presumed to appear otherwise than in green slippers with high heels, and red cloth stockings, 'the court dress always worn before the King of Persia.'

Also, to anyone avid for conventional local colour, the room itself in which we found ourselves sitting might have come as rather a disappointment. But it was not long before I came to recognise in just such a room as this the salient characteristics of post-Qajar Persian official interior decoration.

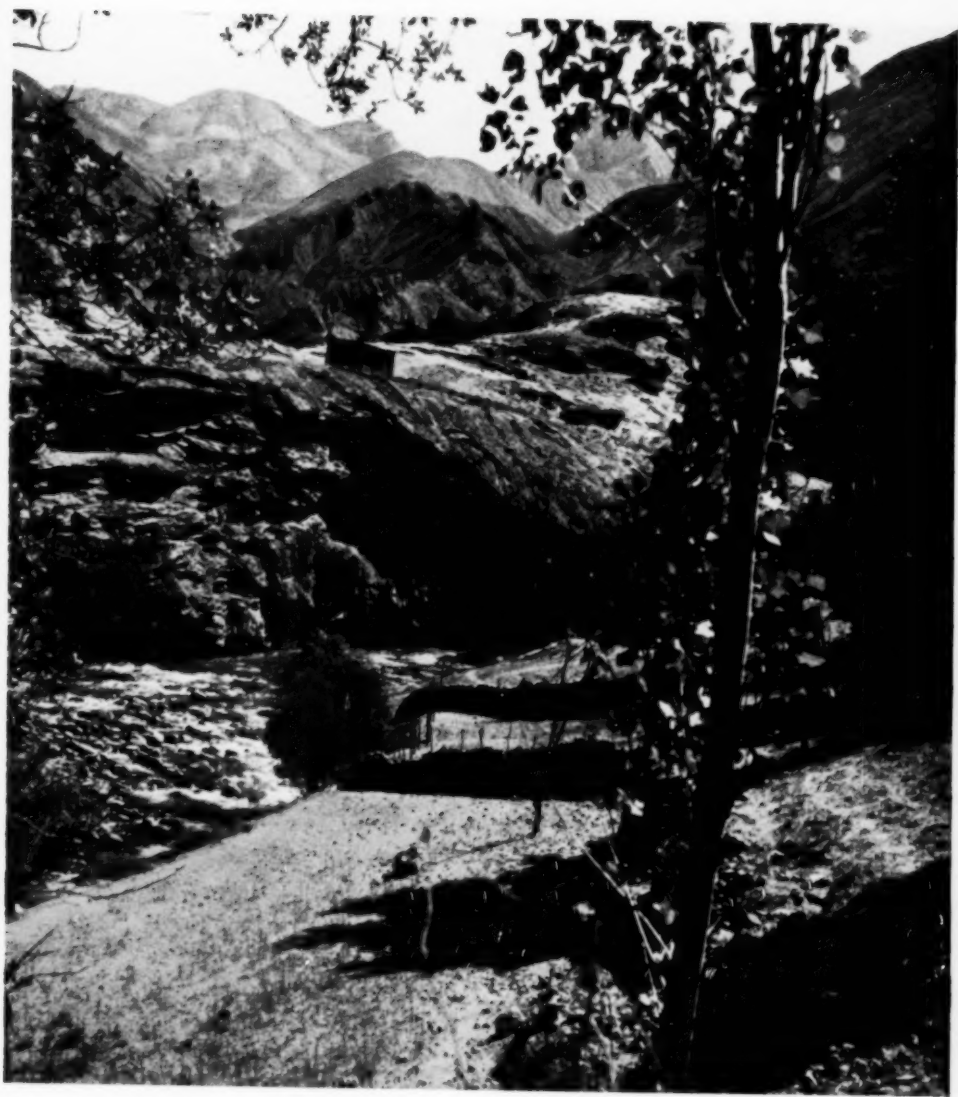
In most of the public monuments that he had erected, ministries, post-offices, poets' tombs and statues, the Shah's father had reverted



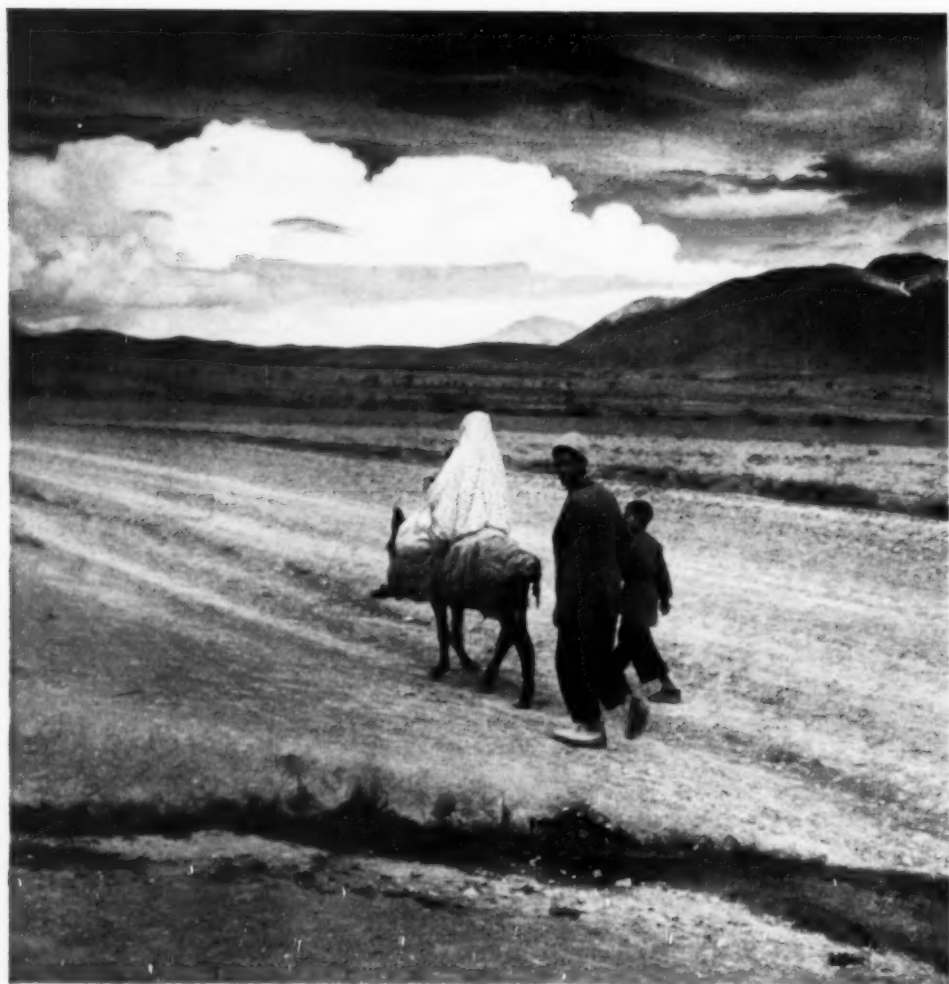
THE SHAH RIDING IN THE VALLEY OF KALARDASHT



IN THE GARDEN OF THE PALACE OF SAHABQARANIEH



LANDSCAPE NEAR TEHRAN



ROAD NEAR TEHRAN

to the massive style of pre-Muslim Iran. But for all his understandable desire to evoke the glories of the Aryan past, it would have been unreasonable to expect Riza Shah himself, in the twentieth century, to have chosen to live in a reproduction of an Achaemenian interior. Instead, since his cult of the ancient Iranian was meant as an indication of Persia's re-awakening, nothing was more normal than that he should have chosen to live himself, and encouraged his richer subjects to live, surrounded by the amenities of up-to-date living in the countries considered civilised in his own day.

The Europe from which he had taken his first models had been in the state of transition from Edwardian rococo to nineteen-twenty-something *moderne*; and even by the time he had come to produce his latest works the functional style had barely emerged from its dawn of beige. Wherever there was an irresistible call for a touch of fantasy, in the moulding of a plaster ceiling or the design of a light, his architects and artists had resorted not so much to the crazy intricacies of Persian silversmiths or rug-weavers or carvers in stone as to the more restrained scallops and swirls of those who had decorated the comfortable, time-honoured hotels of Paris or San Remo or Bad Gastein.

Interiors as recent as that of the Shah's house at Sa'adabad, in which we now sat, had a simplicity absent from Riza Shah's earlier villas and palaces. White or biscuit-coloured cement had ousted onyx and pink marble. The woodwork of doors and windows was heavy, but no longer ornate. Armchairs were uncompromisingly square. And on the light-toned walls hung vastly enlarged photographic portraits and a few oil paintings of strictly contemporary subjects.

But the present Shah did not look as though he would be the sort of person who would take a great interest in interior decoration. After some polite questions as to my official past, of the kind intended to anchor the new diplomatic arrival, however, unwillingly, in one of several possible categories, he embarked with the Ambassador on a *tour d'horizon*, pausing now and then to take a closer look towards some particular point of the compass, though one sensed that they were a pair of veterans who had sailed the same seas together innumerable times before.

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I listened to them with half an ear, but was busier with my eyes. To me, the Shah's face presented no unexpected detail of shape or colour or texture. Nor did his way of moving or speaking belie the impression that his photographs had conveyed of his appearance and, as one had imagined, his personality and character. Of middling height, slight but well built, pleasant if a little melancholy-looking in repose, serious-eyed under heavy eyebrows, essentially modest; yet, for some reason not exactly easy to please. He was no actor. There was no apparent intention on his part to magnetise anybody, so that it was hardly surprising that one did not feel immediately drawn to him as one is sometimes conscious of being drawn to far lesser men at a first meeting. On the contrary, he kept himself, for all his simplicity and directness of manner, a little shyly aloof. Hardly the kind of person, I consoled myself, to like anyone at first sight. Though he evidently had a sense of humour, his face clouded even more quickly and completely than it lightened. There was one particular line formed by the right arch of his upper lip, which rose noticeably higher than its counterpart on the left, that contrived to lend to his whole face its individual expression of hesitancy and sadness. In a man more obviously passionate it might have betrayed a touch of bitterness or frustration, even of exasperation habitually under restraint. But the Shah's face was so kindly, it was impossible to read into that line more than a hint of disillusion; as though something far back already but not forgotten had bruised the originally spontaneous and confident, but essentially vulnerable spirit behind his eyes.

After a while a large dog, a German shepherd, came in from the heat of the garden through the French windows and made as if to pass into the room beyond, which was curtained off by some brownish material from the one in which we were sitting. In doing so he became entangled in the material and rolled over on the polished floor, dragging with him the curtain itself, together with a heavy wooden rod that supported it and some plaster from the ceiling, all of which fell in a heap around the Shah's head. He extricated himself and left the curtain lying on the floor, smiling a little wryly, as though in recognition of the flimsiness of the decor by which all kings are surrounded.

Valentine Lawford

Sir John had been invited to stay for luncheon ; and when I thought that a suitable time had elapsed I caught his eye, and judged by its peculiar brilliance that I could now leave. I stood up and went towards where the Shah was sitting, mumbling appropriately. He stood up too and shook my hand ; and after executing my penultimate bow as he did so and my ultimate bow at what I took to be the door (for I was edging away respectfully backwards) I put out my hand behind me and seized a metal object which refused to move. Seeing that I had grasped the wrong door-handle, the successor of countless Shahs came quickly over and opened the door for me himself.

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In the weeks that followed, I came from convenience to see much of his Minister of Court, Hazhir. Conventionally, I suppose, it would have been more proper for the British Chargé d'Affaires to wait on the Foreign Minister or, in a country where we had the position that we still anomalously enjoyed in Persia, on the Prime Minister, who at that time was Mohammad Sa'ed. But if I was personally charmed by Mr. Sa'ed, who was genial and shrewd (though with a misleading physical resemblance to one of my most forceful great-aunts) neither he nor his Foreign Minister, Ali Asghar Hikmatt, an erudite and equally charming man, seemed to have anything significant to tell me if I asked for an interview ; nor did they apparently much desire to invite me to call on them, of their own accord. It was widely believed that Sa'ed, who (by contemporary Persian standards) had been in office for quite a long time, would shortly be replaced by someone rather more brisk, though God alone knew by whom. In the meanwhile, both he and the government over which he presided were to all appearances relaxed in a sort of late summer stupor. Already to a sensitive ear came the rumbling of an approaching storm. But the Government of the Shah, like picnickers who had finished their excellent luncheon, lay prone in the cornfield, dreamily conscious of the clouds piling up on the horizon, but too comfortable inside to gather up their impedimenta and move, as yet, into the shelter of the neighbouring wood.

Hazhir was a man in early middle age, of fairly humble origin,

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who had previously held the posts of Finance Minister and even Prime Minister. Efficient and hardworking, he was for that reason among others anathema to many would-be ministers in Tehran, the intriguing as well as the somnolent. By none in Persia was Hazhir more cordially detested than by the leaders of the National Front, at that time emerging into prominence, in the absence of any other organised political party other than the outlawed Communists. It is difficult to convey to a non-Persian mind the sinister tinge of the aura with which Hazhir's opponents had succeeded in investing him. Without formulating any definite charges, they managed to imply that he was 'a bad man'; and since it was widely put about that he was not a good Muslim, absolutely no one had the courage to defend him openly. Even the fact that he had never married was used to mark him with a religious as well as a social stigma. And in a country where nothing, however contradictory, can confidently be disbelieved, his detractors happily insinuated that he was too well disposed towards the West and at the same time dangerously pro-Russian.

Thus ironically it came about that his zeal to serve the Shah and his undoubted capabilities, far from helping the monarch or strengthening his position, actually harmed him and lessened his popularity; as though his principal confidant had been a disease to which the Shah had carelessly exposed himself and by which he must be presumed to have become infected. Already in those summer days Hazhir may have guessed that his days were numbered. Under his stern manner and the air of *eminence grise* that he affected, there were signs that he was becoming less and less sure of himself. He was a gloomy man now, never smiling, so far as I could tell from his mouth; for one never saw his eyes. He hid them always behind black spectacles, just as he hid his thoughts behind an equally opaque, toneless voice.

His office was in a little villa under the trees along the lonely back drive to Sa'adabad. As I sat there in an antechamber waiting to go in and see him (the intricately patterned rugs lay one overlapping the other on the floor, and through the windows, which were never open, the light filtered in, all green from the leaves outside) I could not help overhearing the voices of his visitors, whining and droning

in the next room until he dismissed them and they shuffled off, still talking among themselves, down the stairs towards their next rendezvous, in all probability with one of his bitterest enemies. If I happened to pass them on the landing, or if I was for a moment visible to them through the open door, they looked at me just long enough, with their busy, uncertain eyes, to recognise me for a foreigner and therefore the bearer of a contagion to which they, thanks be to Allah, were congenitally immune.

But more than once I was instructed to request an audience of the Shah himself, and went up to see him at Sa'adabad.

Most of all, I came to be impressed by the loneliness of the political eminence on which he found himself. Human society, even companionship, he had ; for though he was at that time unmarried he was the head and centre of a large family, and his brothers and sisters were often with him. His daylight hours were more than filled with meetings and conversations and public functions and visits ; and he was constantly surrounded by all the apparatus of royalty. Among the politicians upon whom he had to depend, and through whom he must somehow work, there were undoubtedly some who honestly identified themselves with the causes which he was known to have at heart ; reforms political, economic, social, educational, agricultural. But if, like Hazhir, they gave visible proof of personal devotion, they almost did him a disservice, for they called down upon him as well as upon themselves the jealousy and dislike of influential men at that time out of office, who preferred that the country should dissolve into chaos in a Persian way rather than seek for prosperity, as it was understood outside Persia, in a partnership of whatever kind with the nations of the West.

Even among the relatively secure members of the aristocracy, though there might be some who privately deplored the national chaos, few had the courage openly to align themselves with any serious effort to stem it. On the contrary, it seemed that the vast majority were as though by instinct opposed to anything so unashamedly practical. However much the Shah might aspire, from conscience and education, to act the part of a moderate, constitutional monarch, it was a fact that he could not count on one of the main sources of advice and support of constitutional monarchs elsewhere :

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an upper class universally well disposed towards the monarchy for reasons of self-preservation and snobbery, with an accumulation of wisdom and a sense of measure derived from generations of privilege and experience.

Notoriously conservative, the representatives of the Muslim religion might have been expected to buttress the Throne, in a country threatened by communist expansion. Their predecessors had sometimes stood behind the Shahs of the past. But the memory of Riza Shah's innovations and his manner of dealing with priestly recalcitrance still rankled. As for his son, it was true that he was a pious Muslim and had never harmed anyone ; but such virtues seemed as nothing to them beside his declared intention of instituting reforms which one could not but suspect they were determined to resist just as they had resisted his father's. All the more determined, if the truth were known, because they were confident that unlike his father he was not the man to hang them for it. Accordingly, as with the public men, so with the clergy ; any rare, courageous imam or mullah who dared to become associated with the Shah's schemes (for they as yet were little more than that) at once was suspect to his more bigoted colleagues and henceforth walked always at the mercy of bullets, clubs and stones.

Constitutional government, in a conventional western sense, there had never been in Persia, in spite of the institution of a so-called constitutional system after the Revolution of 1906. That system had in effect only favoured the landowning aristocracy, whom it had freed from the ruler's personal tyranny and who, when it came to elections, happily disposed of their peasants' votes. But it was inconceivable that the Shah, even had he not been inclined to follow a non-dictatorial pattern, should have been able to justify any other form of government to his potential friends in America and Britain, whose deeply ingrained (but perhaps not too deeply reasoned) habit it had become to see in an outward approximation of their own form of government the only hope for nations whose independence it was in their interest to preserve against communism. To all and sundry in the West, it had come to be accepted as an axiom that if Persia were to be saved it could only be through economic reform and constitutional, parliamentary government. Any indiscreet suggestion that

some form of dictatorship might be better fitted to preserve Persian integrity was passed over in pained silence.

Yet the truth was that the very people in the Shah's kingdom who should have been interested in reforms and who would most profit by them, the lower orders, private soldiers, workmen, peasants, had grown accustomed to millennia of dictatorship and as yet hardly knew or cared about constitutions, or parliaments. There was no reason why they should. In the old days their landlords had used their votes. Nowadays, since hardly any of them were able to pass the literacy test (which had recently been enforced precisely in order to curb such abuses) they still had in effect little voting power and in parliament therefore as good as no representation. If parliament represented anything it was a combination of the upper and richer classes and the 'advanced' semi-educated townspeople who in Persian political life occupy the place of an intelligentsia. While the former might hold reactionary views and the latter contain a proportion of malcontents and crypto-Communists, they were mostly, for their differing reasons, impervious to the attractions of what in other countries would be regarded as efficient government. In the chaos which this so-called constitutionalism was later to unload upon Persia, it was not surprising that the lower orders themselves gave way to the prevailing hysteria and actually served those of the extreme right or extreme left whose common aim it was to exploit them. For though by ancient instinct, reverence or herd spirit, the ordinary people of Iran were loyal to the idea of royalty which the Shah of the time personified, the man on the throne could only command their loyalty so long as he was evidently supreme. If fanatics and extremists appeared to be in control of the country then either the Shah was behind them, and they were the people to follow, or, if he was not behind them, then he was no longer in command and had no claim on the people's devotion. It was the kingship, the office, and not the individual, not even the dynasty, to which the populace was basically attached. There had been so many dynasties in the past. It had made precious little difference which one came in and which went out, and the present Shah's father had been only the most recent of several to demonstrate that a strong man who could wrest the kingship from the hands of the legal monarch, even though he be the

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descendant of a whole line of kings, would almost immediately command the loyalty of the masses. And it went without saying that he would also obtain at least a temporary semblance of support from the upper classes. (Riza Shah had actually had in his revolutionary cabinet a member of the Imperial Family which he was about to dispossess.) Kingship in Persia was like the headship of a tribe. It could never be held for long by an obviously weak man, however impeccable his claims, or intentions. And the vast majority of the Persian race, confronted by a strong leader, would naturally switch their loyalty to him, like fickle hinds in the rutting season.

Of all this the Shah was perfectly well aware. He had inherited it from his revered, Promethean parent, along with other problems far more numerous than his estates and palaces.

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The very brothers and sisters with whom Riza Shah had provided his successor, and whose company the young Shah enjoyed, constituted, in the peculiar atmosphere of Persian politics, a problem in themselves. They were happy and devoted, but for all the semblance of grandeur by which they were surrounded there was an undeniable pathos about the family of boys and girls which Riza Shah had left behind.

Segregated from the masses of the people from whom they had sprung, frankly envied by the upper class and intelligentsia, fully conscious of the weight of the ancient name of Pahlavi with which their father had hoped to bind them to the sturdy, Iranian past, they grouped themselves, as if for their mutual protection, around their eldest brother. Some of them, including the Shah himself, had been born before their father had assumed the crown; all of them, however, had been brought up in the atmosphere of his kingship and took Persia and their position seriously, despite their travels and education in the utterly different, and potentially upsetting, atmosphere beyond its borders.

But, whatever their individual achievements and intentions, it would be dishonest to suggest that they received much credit for them in Persia, so industriously did the gossips of the bazaar play

on the credulity of public opinion, which was in any case unused to virtue in the eminent.

Sometimes one or the other of the sisters would give a small party for the Shah. There was always the risk that local imaginations would transform an evening spent dancing to the music of a gramophone and playing parlour games into an orgy ; but even the Imperial Family felt that they sometimes had the right to relax. For himself, preoccupied and plagued as he was, the Shah was not all sadness. On rare occasions he was still young enough at heart to dance the samba or play the drums in a mock orchestra or even, tutored by the incorrigible British, take part in a Highland reel.

One evening in the summer of 1950, Princess Shams gave a party in her house at Sa'adabad to celebrate the engagement of Prince Abdur Riza. When dinner was over the Sous-chef du Protocole announced, innocently enough, that we were to play Musical Chairs. Fifteen men and women (few of those chosen, I remember noticing, were Persians) were assembled on an upper landing, and at a signal from the official were expected to race, time after time, down the wide flight of polished stairs and across the equally polished ballroom floor and struggle to seat themselves on one of a diminishing row of elegant chairs that had been set out in front of the sofa on which the Shah sat, surrounded by his family. He insisted that the game be played to its conclusion, so greatly did he enjoy the spectacle of the young men and women of the West indulging in the extraordinary sports that were part of their cultural gift to the backward inhabitants of the Orient. A few hours later he left us, to sit down once again to his work in the little villa farther up the hill.

It was on the next afternoon, at his suggestion, that I drove up to the Imperial stables at Sa'adabad to wait for him, at the end of the day's work. On that occasion, and later, whenever we rode together, we always ended by turning our horses towards the fields and wasteland eastwards from Shimran. Sometimes he did not have time to change after a day with the troops and would drive himself to the stableyard in his khaki and scarlet uniform. But more often he wore civilian clothes, a tweed coat and a soft hat ; sometimes when the sun was particularly strong, a wide-brimmed Western hat that he had been given when he visited California. Immediately behind

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us rode the Master of the Horse, an impeccable, amply proportioned man, with scent on his handkerchief, who would not have looked out of place at a French Presidential shoot at Rambouillet; and after him came two or three grooms in palace uniform. The grooms were mostly fairly old men, some of whom had been with his father. In feature they were scarcely different from those other representatives of the dying race of grooms all over the world. They had weather-beaten, simple, animal faces, small noses and large mouths and close cropped hair, like Irish hunt-servants; and as grooms will, they always seemed to have trouble with one or another of their mounts, for they rode the young horses or those that most needed exercise. Their uniforms were greenish-grey, with the gold Imperial crown above the peak of their military-looking caps.

As we passed in a body through the leafy sidestreets of Tajrish on the way to the open country, the Shah was often recognised. When people salamed he returned their greetings with a smile and a raised hand, or a salute if he were in uniform. Sometimes he said a word to the women and children who, hearing the clatter of hoofs on the stones, came out of their houses to see what was up and stood in little groups, cheering and waving, as he rode by. Their voices, high-pitched and unco-ordinated, gave the whole performance a small-town, amateurish quality which seemed to emphasise its spontaneity and warmth. Even making allowance for the fact that anything of the kind was an event in the lives of those who inhabited those boring by-roads, to one with even half an open mind there could be no doubt of the popularity of the institution of monarchy among the Shah's lesser subjects.

On the main roads and in the more frequented parts of the town, the men, many of them, bowed, unless by design or inadvertence their backs were turned towards the cavalcade. Sometimes one thought one caught a dubious look in the eyes of those who were respectably dressed, in the Persian idiom (that is, those who wore the grey suit, or grey coat with trousers of another material, which had become a sort of uniform for the enlightened city-dwellers, professors and students, merchants, crooks, blades and pimps, and distinguished them from the equally unshaven workmen and peasants who hid their traditional rags under cast-off American army tunics).

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But in the countryside there was never any question ; the welcome was universal. Only the blind or the mentally deficient could remain unmoved by the unexpected, historic apparition of a king on a horse. On the edge of the plain the shepherds stood smiling, a little sheepish themselves, among their smelly flocks. Cadaverous old men in shirt-tails paused at the windlass, silhouetted against the sunset on the top of some mound above a *kanat* from which they were drawing earth or water. The farmers' children left their cows under the willows and ran across the stubble, raising streamers of dust ; and a group of fat week-enders from the city, newly installed in a garden still all sand and stones, got up from the tin table where they had been passing the time of day and waved their embroidered handkerchiefs through a gap in the half-built wall.

As the Shah was human, there was no doubt that he enjoyed it. Sometimes after a particularly effusive demonstration of loyalty I would catch his eye ; and though the look he gave me then was half deprecating, there was a trace in it of mildly mischievous satisfaction that someone who might have doubted had now seen the truth with his own eyes.

However, we rode at random, choosing here a soft field to rest the horses' feet, there a raised bank around the treacherous quagmire of too recent irrigation, or a narrow, malodorous short cut between leprous-looking walls to avoid a crowded village street. And one never had the impression that he courted applause. He must long ago have had his fill of acclamations from obedient crowds and sycophantic officials. But the scattered cheering of individual humble people about their daily business could only have been welcome to one who, working in loneliness, had need of human encouragement. If only there had not been for him the bitter after-thought of how little he had so far been able to do to help them.

Such was the dilative effect of open air and sun and wind on my weak official conscience that I often asked him questions, and even more frequently expressed myself, with an indiscretion that would have been unthinkable between four walls, in the restrained atmosphere of an audience. But looking between the two ears of a horse, with one's eyes fixed on the distant landscape into which one is riding, it has always seemed to me that one might say anything to anybody.

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And so it was at a walk or a trot. But when the horses broke into a canter our words blew away with the wind. All our self-importance, and the importance that we accorded to each other, blew away with them ; and in its place nothing remained but the ageless, animal joy of being one of a group of riders cavorting, for no reason but that it is a pleasure to cavort, across a plain.

There was a spot, near the old Qajar villa of Farmanieh, hidden in a tufted poplar grove behind mud walls, where the Shah would let his horse's canter lengthen into a gallop. His cinnamon-coloured Afghan hound, which had hitherto been loping over the landscape like a hunting dog in a miniature, now came in to heel, and the whole collection of attendants, led by the Master of the Horse, a look of faint apprehension on his well-fed face, closed around the Shah as best they might and scorched over the stones behind him. There was something specifically Persian about this final gallop. For every Persian, however *soigné* his appearance and sedentary his present life, has still about him a memory of the nomad, hunter or tent-dweller ; and few of those who ride at all can resist the temptation to race on horseback across the hard ground, one of a bevy of riders, a hunting party, a migrating tribe, close on the heels of the leader.

The Shah's gallop always led, in the end, up a steep hill towards Niavaran ; wisely enough, since the horse that he rode, a tall chestnut stallion, by a Hungarian horse out of an Arab mare, was almost impossible to hold on the flat. Only at the top of the hill could he rein him in ; and we all drew up chaotically around him, on the very edge of the main road. Often it was already dusk and one after the other our horses, dazzled by oncoming headlights, would slither on the metalled surface of the road, between the echoing walls.

Cars, macadam, telegraph-poles, street-lighting and the evening smoke of suburbs ; the whole paraphernalia of the present was suddenly there again, as though it had been a pervasive smell which the fresh air of the empty plateau had for a moment driven from our nostrils. The glow of sunset had gone altogether, even from the highest mountains where a few minutes earlier it had perched like a row of red embers, miraculously ; and our horses, sobered and by now even a little jaded, once more took up their hierarchic positions in the cortège.

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To reach the palace of Sahabqaranieh, where the Shah's car was awaiting us, we had to ride alongside the wall of a modern house of dung-coloured brick at the western end of the village of Niavaran. It had been built by Hazhir, and in the late summer and autumn of the previous year before his assassination, I had often sat there with him among the geraniums and royal blue, plush armchairs and wobbly tables covered with sweets. Since his death it had remained empty and deserted and the steep drive with its narrow gate was barred against the world.

To the average Tehrani, so inextricably were prejudice, half-truth and calumny mixed in his mind, Hazhir, the assassin's victim, had by that time assumed the wretched status of an executed criminal. There were tales that already as he lay in hospital after the attempt on his life the concourse of visitors had been so great and the conversation so animated that his wound had been neglected. Those who had come to pay a formal visit on a distinguished invalid found themselves supervising his transition into the next world; and it was even hinted (almost credibly, in that strange city) that the presence at his bedside of certain of the visitors had been motivated less by wishes for his recovery than by the need to ensure that the assassination should not after all have been a flop. Such stories were known to everyone; they occurred quite naturally to the most normal Persian imagination. And it was not long before the public had come to regard his passing as little more regrettable than that of some injured, unclean animal by the roadside, which an honest man would rightly leave to bleed to death. In shining contrast, the man who had killed him occupied an honoured place among the swelling band of martyrs to the combined cause of religious orthodoxy and fanatical nationalism; and while in consequence the murderer's family found themselves, to their surprise, the centre of a vast circle of admiration and sympathy, with people coming like pilgrims to visit the house where the hero-assassin had been born, the prosaic villa of the Shah's once trusted Minister and confidant, abandoned and unoccupied, loomed balefully under the moon like any *Maison du Pendu*.

Each time we came past it and entered Niavaran in the evening, the sound of the crowd's ribald laughter at his funeral and their shouts of encouragement to his murderer as he went to execution rang in

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my ears. All death by violence, the capacity to glory in the extermination of one's fellows, the desire to justify one's self and one's half-baked theories by shedding human blood, even the very institution of public hanging ; such horrors were certainly not a Persian prerogative. But it happened that it was in Persia that the whole grisly apparatus forced itself most effectively on my squeamish Anglo-Saxon mind, leaving it momentarily baffled and appalled. That physical destruction and posthumous disgrace should await public men with whom the majority, or the most influential, differed, seemed to be regarded almost as a matter of course by the contemporary Persian ; perhaps even, however much he might detest such a conception, by the Shah himself. As for educated Persians generally, I observed that after Hazhir's death, whatever may have been their private reactions, they avoided mentioning his name. His was an example to be avoided and his memory made them uncomfortable.

On those late summer evenings, in the village where Hazhir had built himself a house and the police had once stood respectfully on guard outside his gate, there were always men and boys squatting among piles of water-melons under the arbours of withered greenery along the street, talking and talking as night thickened and occasionally looking up from under their dark eyelashes at the back of a passer-by. Outside the shop-fronts the dirt-paths had been washed down and there was a smell of wet dust and washed, but still dirty, walls. Every day, maybe, the earth and whitewash were watered, but surely the ancient surface of the world was past washing clean. Were not hatred and prejudice and unhappiness equally ineradicable ? And was there not a quality of eternity about the very gestures of the squatting men and boys, sudden and sickeningly timorous, as of a race accustomed from the beginning of time to go in daily fear of the power of other men ?

But the Shah, more accustomed than I to the abyss along the edge of which his duty lay, did not seem to share my vertigo ; and somewhat to my shame would often talk happily and seriously, all the way back to the palace, of the things he aspired to do for his people if God would give him time.

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Valentine Lawford

Early in September, 1950, I went up with him and two of his brothers to the Imperial hunting lodge in the vale of Kalardasht. The hottest part of the year was over and we planned to have at least five days holiday, away from the preoccupations of the capital.

More than halfway across the massive complex of the Elburz on the way from Tehran to the Caspian Sea, the Kalardasht hunting ground centred around a wide hollow, twenty square miles in area, encircled by wooded hills and mountains. It had long been a favourite resort of his predecessors; particularly of Nasr-ed-Din Shah, who in the middle of the nineteenth century had laid a nine-foot cobbled road over the mountains so that on his frequent expeditions to hunt the ibex there he could take with him not only the conventional impedimenta of a Qajar hunting-party: tents, victuals, horses, mules and throngs of servants, but also the whole of his extensive harem, with as little discomfort as possible to the ladies. Since those days a motor road had been built over the Kandavan Pass linking Karaj, between Tehran and Kasvin, with Chalus on the Caspian shore; and still later, Riza Shah had blasted an astonishing tunnel more than a mile long through the solid rock under the head of the pass, where the original track, laboriously serpentine up and down the naked mountain-face, had lain deep in snow and as good as impassable from autumn to spring.

In the valley itself, Riza Shah, haunted as always by the idea of developing such natural amenities as his country possessed and foreseeing a tourist industry in Persia of which even in my day there was no sign, had erected a hotel in grey stucco and a group of rather dour-looking guest-houses by the side of the Sardabrud (cold water river), a mountain torrent renowned for its fishing that watered the fields and woods of Kalardasht on its way down to the sea. High above the valley on clear days the white peak of the Takht-i-Sulaiman (Solomon's Throne) presided over the landscape. It was the second highest of all the mountains of the Elburz and its snows, the source of the Sardabrud, were responsible for Kalardasht's fertility and fame. Appropriately enough, the valley's other would-be benefactor, the late Shah, had enthroned himself like Solomon on a peak; but more modestly. At the top of a round hill he had set up a square, pink house of his own, from which Kalardasht derived something of the

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Royal cachet that Deeside acquires from the proximity of Balmoral. But though the house on the hill-top continued to be for the villagers a comforting reminder of Royal patronage, it was rarely occupied by the present Shah, who was too busy in Tehran to play the squire in Kalardasht.

On that September morning, he drove us there in his pale blue convertible Packard. There were no tents nor mules, nor court ladies in our party. We crossed the sunbaked mountains early, to avoid the heat ; and shortly after midday we were already dropping down into the fabulous, green world beyond. Once over the hills that separated Kalardasht from the Chalus road the dust beneath our wheels turned suddenly, as though by some spell, into soft brown mud. In the valley itself a Scotch mist, half drizzle and half fog, enveloped the countryside. The famous landscape was invisible. But one could tell, from the stubble fields that bordered the road, that this was farming country ; and one guessed that the farmhouses themselves were hidden among the groups of walnut trees of great size that loomed like ghosts out of the surrounding vagueness. Even more eerie than the trees were the conical haystacks, thatched and raised above the sodden ground on poles. They lurched impossibly to one side, like drunken men on stilts.

Nothing could be less like Persia, I was thinking. Central Europe, perhaps, or more specifically Hungary, even Transylvania ; a country on the fringe of real life, opening out on the far side to let in the gypsies. And sure enough, as we approached the main village of the valley, there was a smell of damp wood-smoke ; and by the roadside, standing in a neat group behind a tall man of dreary aspect, what seemed to be a chorus of harvesters and brigands in an amateur musical play. Ruritania, I cried inwardly, as though welcoming an old friend ; only to observe, on closer examination, that that happy little country of my youthful dreams was no longer, in this second half of the twentieth century, quite as I remembered it. The men of this Caspian village, like Anthony Hope's hardy, romantic peasants, wore small, round, black caps on their heads and woollen leggings and home-made shoes ; and the women with white headcloths tied under the chin and pink or yellow coats or blouses, might at first sight have seemed ideally suited to grace the colour pages of

some geographical magazine. But alas, the space between the men's caps and leggings was more often than not occupied by the forlorn remnants of a European suit, heavily darned ; and even the female costume, for all its spring colouring, was on closer view revealed as little more than a shapeless combination of old rags and cummerbunds, wound and rewound from neck to waist, where it terminated in a pair of black, clerical grey, or pin-striped trousers, from under which emerged two strong, bare feet, indistinguishable in colour from the mud in which they were planted. Worse still, most of the faces of Kalardasht, male and female, young and old, were sallow and sad. Even if now and then one caught sight of red cheeks, the red was unnaturally violent and hectic, as though it had been painted over a yellow background. For until recently malaria had been the scourge of the whole region.

At a signal from the headman the scarecrows lifted their caps and cheered. *Zande bash !* Long life to the King of Kings ! And the women clutched their bodies and cried as if in pain, though I fancy they were rather in an ecstasy of respect. The Shah stood and talked to the headman about the crops and the hunting prospects. After a few moments a man at the edge of the group came forward with a petition in his hand, and began to address him. When he had finished all eyes in the group turned suddenly on the Shah. Rather shyly, he asked a few questions ; and, since the answers appeared to be satisfactory, directed a fat officer of the guard who had been travelling in one of the Buicks behind us to take the man's name and see that his case received attention. (He had a difference with his landlord.) The petitioner, who had been fingering his cap with an expression of bird-like expectancy on his face, now gave a sickly smile and retreated bowing to his place in the group amid signs of general approval ; and we drove on. The road wound away from the river, and in a few minutes the car drew up before the door of the hunting-lodge on the hill-top.

When we went to our rooms I found that I had been allotted a large one with an Italianate ceiling of gold and rose and mauve.

It rained remorselessly. All afternoon we sat in a room overlooking the invisible valley, reading illustrated magazines and making desultory conversation. I began to fear that it was going to be one of those

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house-parties, memorable only for indigestion from lack of exercise and the combined breath of all the guests condensing on the window-panes.

But before it grew dark the sky cleared and we drove down in a jeep to the hamlet outside the gates to see our horses, which had arrived on foot over the mountains. There some men of the guard lit our path with lanterns and we picked our way through the mud to the door of a wooden barn. The horses, up to their hocks in dry bracken, were too engrossed by their evening meal to pay attention to us. In the light of the lanterns a mist rose from their drying bodies ; and in it the grooms moved around smiling, their minds dwelling on rice and sleep. They had already made their own beds, a group of old gilims, striped rugs of scarlet and yellow and black, in a corner of the stable, on the bracken which they shared with their horses.

Each day we rode out for several hours ; and I do not recall a single expedition on that holiday when the Shah was not the recipient of at least half a dozen petitions. Men and women, peasants of the valley or strangers from over the mountains, stalked him for hours, spying out his movements before settling themselves at a vantage point on a hilltop or squatting by the side of a woodland path along which it was for some reason rumoured that he would return from a ride. Rather to the boredom of the excellent, fat officer, who now rode with us as a bodyguard on an incongruously thin little grey, they would pop like spooks from their hiding-places, sing out a traditional greeting in a high voice and launch at once, for fear of missing their chance, into the burden of their message. There was a special whining tone, a sort of musical convention, apparently considered appropriate for the presentation of petitions to royalty, which made their carefully rehearsed phrases sound as metallic and uneasy as a poem recited by a shy child at a school prize-giving. But in fact they were anything but shy. Their direct approach to the sovereign was something accepted and honourable ; and once they had done reciting they conversed with him with no self-consciousness at all.

There was a woman, with the purposeful face of those attracted to unpopular causes (she was in fact a Kurdish peasant's wife whose son was for some reason unpopular with the law), who came bustling down a hillside one day about noon with her daughter-in-law, both

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barefoot, and chattering like jays. When she had harangued the Shah for several minutes the fat officer tried to force his poor little mount between them. But she brushed horse and rider out of the way and clung firmly to the Shah's stirrup, as though it had been the lapel of his coat. He listened charmingly (as some statesmen will listen to women with a cause) and promised to have an enquiry made ; and we left her triumphantly dictating to the fat officer, for whom there was no choice but to make yet another note on the piece of paper, by now rather grubby and scribbled over, which he carried around in his pocket for the purpose.

There were husbands whose wives had, unaccountably, left them ; and women who had equally unaccountably been left by their husbands. And more than one peasant who had a difference of opinion with his landlord. Though the Shah had the good nature, and good sense, to listen sympathetically to those who came to him with their domestic problems, he was more deeply concerned with the relations of peasant and landowner, and the complaints of the farmers, preoccupied by the poverty of their crops.

On the last day he took me with him in his aircraft over the mountains to the north, to Ramsar on the Caspian Sea. It was the most famous of all Persian seaside resorts. His father had built himself a yellow marble house there and the most luxurious and successful of his hotels, long, white and imposingly palatial, backed by deep blue-green woods that were the haunt of wolf and bear. Along the coastline the woods merged into a green patchwork of ricefields and tea plantations, sprinkled with villages and veined with the water of innumerable streams. There were women in pink moving about the gardens and working in the fields. The sea sparkled in the sun and the whole coastal belt, luxuriant, vivid, full of motion, seemed to sparkle back. Parallel with the seashore, divided from it only by a fringe of tall green reeds, lay the little airfield of Ramsar, where Prince Ghulam Riza and the others stood waiting for us. As soon as we had landed we took our clothes off in the reeds and swam out to a submerged sandbank a hundred yards off-shore. Here all the Persians, including the Shah, took it in turns to duck one another merrily for half an hour.

The water was invitingly tepid ; and the sand along the shore had

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burnt the soles of my feet on the way down to the sea. But after my head had been held under water for longer than I cared by a number of my friends, nothing could prevent me returning to the security of the land, where I was joined by the only other non-Persian on the expedition, the son of an Indian Raja. For all our British pasts he and I were not so tough and jolly as those Iranians. Lying comfortably on a towel on the sand he began, I do not now remember why, to talk about the Mountbattens and Lady Cunard.

Later we drove into the village and had lunch in an open pavilion between the hotel and the sea. There seemed to be no one staying in the hotel that day. The season was past; and down the long walk to the beach, where the gardens were famous, groups of marigolds and zinnias, the rearguard of summer's defeated army, marched disconsolately towards autumn, in the shelter of a double row of cypress trees.

When lunch was over I went down alone to the sea. The Shah and his companions were still at the table, talking; but their conversation had become more serious, and feeling that it was probably no concern of mine I slipped away in the hope of dozing for a while on the empty shore. A servant followed me with a deck-chair and when he had set it up on the sand I lay down happily to sleep, knowing that I should be sent for when it was time to return home.

O blessed world! Three o'clock in the afternoon, no sound of voices, and the sea at my feet almost still. Behind me too a heavy stillness had settled now on the fields and gardens where the pink-clad women had been working so busily that morning.

Yet sleep never came. Nor even peace of mind. Instead, like the thought of death that bothers one seriously only when one is ill, or the irrefutably logical despair from which most of us are happily immune except when for some reason we lie awake long before dawn, there began the whole familiar, uneasy train of thought that has never failed to emerge from its dark corner of my brain each time I have found myself, as now on the Caspian seashore, face to face all alone with the physical reality, land, sea or sky, of the Soviet Union.

I recognised an old Moscow feeling. But more specifically here, in North Persia, the uneasiness arose not only from a natural, humane preoccupation with the lives of the millions of other human beings

living ahead of me across that stretch of water, or a few hundred miles to my right and left overland, millions whom I might never approach nor set eyes on, let alone know or learn to love. Nor did it arise merely from a nasty feeling (unavoidable as death, irrefutable as the purest logic) that if the rulers of Russia decided to swallow up the landscape in which I was now reclining, the very sand under my feet, the green gardens and blue forests at my back, there was at that moment as good as nothing to stop them.

It was admittedly from such obvious considerations as these that the train of thought took its initial momentum. But soon it had swept beyond them, to the point where I found myself asking how far the kind of existence one led in the free world outside Russia was in fact superior to what one understood went on within its borders. Not just sentimentally more or less cosy than its Soviet counterpart, or strategically more or less secure; but historically and morally more or less desirable. Was there, in particular, any valid reason for supposing that the masses of the Iranian people, at present nationally independent and nominally free, but under-nourished and under-privileged, were materially better off or spiritually more fulfilled than they would have been under the system that prevailed in the endless country to their north and east and west?

Well might the average easy-going liberal, conventionally cultivated mind revolt against the defeatism implicit in answering that question in the negative. The monstrosities and hypocrisies of certain aspects of Communism in practice hitherto must make all but the wilfully blind hesitate to ascribe to that system as a whole even a relative, or comparative virtue. Yet to give a positive answer sounded almost absurd. In the circumstances it was wiser, perhaps, for the time being to give no answer at all. Or to force oneself instead to look upon the co-existence of the Soviet Union not, unprofitably, as nothing but a constant threat, somehow to be warded off, but, one hoped more profitably, as a challenge to produce in the non-Soviet world (even in Persia) a form of life which was genuinely worth preserving.

Yet was not even that, so far as Persia was concerned, a challenge to adopt an almost hopeless cause? Defeatism was bad enough. But here self-deception loomed; and which was worse?

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Mercifully that question too could be shelved. For down the cypress alley, far sooner than I had expected, came the Shah's A.D.C., like the first rays of the dawn.

At the airfield a woman had brought her dying son to be cured by the Shah. She simply stood in our way and said, "I have a request to make of my Government," holding by the hand a boy of ten or eleven with arms and legs like hazel wands, and a sweating, yellow face turbaned in dirty bandages. The fat officer came up at the double and, with an air of indescribable solicitude, started to write yet more notes on his bit of paper. The Shah looked unhappy; but nothing could deter the officer from his scribbling. His responsibility was almost at an end—provided he could decipher his jottings when he got back to Tehran and pass on the petitions to someone else whose duty it would be to pass them on again. But it was not difficult to read in the Shah's eyes his own despair at his incapacity to work this particular miracle.

It was still light when we landed at Kalardasht and galloped for the last time up the road to the pink palace. When the grooms had led away our two horses, we stood on the lawn, staring down at the shadows of the hills as they enveloped the valley. The first lamps shone vaguely below us and near the river some campers of the newly organised forestry service had lit their fire. At regular intervals a sentry, on duty on the open hillside, passed close by us on his rounds, stepping silently over the grass. Soon we too began to pace up and down, along the very edge of the slope. At first the Shah was silent. Isolated noises from the farms below, assuming as country noises will an added resonance with the approach of night, took the place of conversation.

When he broke our silence, it was to ask, with a smile, whether I had not experienced a sense of relief at putting a distance between myself and the Caspian Sea. Thinking of our morning's horse-play on that uneasy *plage*, I mentioned that when he had undressed to go swimming I had noticed the wide scar on his left shoulder. It was the first time I had seen the mark of an assassin's bullet. He asked me what I thought it felt like suddenly to catch sight of a complete stranger taking aim at one from a distance of six feet. No doubt the stranger had sincerely believed that he was about to perform a

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laudable act, but he, for his part, had been just as sincere, as he waited for the shot, in believing that he had only done his duty. All the visions and premonitions of childhood and illness (common to most human beings, it may be, but more vivid and more likely to create an enduring impression, perhaps, if the child knows that he is destined for kingship) had prepared him for a life of dedication. And if duty were to lead to assassination, then assassination, presumably, must be accepted as duty's reward.

He spoke slowly in the starlight, feeling about for words and finding them after an effort, with at first the uncertainty and finally the sureness of a sculptor seeking the details of the shape which he has apprehended in stone or clay. High above us Cassiopeia was out now, a capital W cocked up on one side; the Plough too, and the Pleiades. I mention them not just because (apart from the Milky Way) they happen to be the only constellations which I have ever been able to recognise, but also because for that very reason they seem always to have provided the ceiling, or background, for so many comparable, night-time conversations about human fate. Only on this evening (we were speaking in educated non-Frenchmen's French, a language whose very clichés can act as a salutary discipline) if our phrases were less ambitious than usual their meaning was less likely to fade by the following day. For the first time that I could recall, duty, conviction, personal courage, resignation pushed to the point of perseverance, ceased to float in my mind like over life-size allegorical figures in a tapestry—decoratively draped, distinguished looking, but ultimately rather boring, because so evidently unreal. Instead they had come, almost alarmingly, to life and were clothed in terms as commonplace and undecorative as agricultural reform, water-supplies, hospital-services, automobile factories, hotels—as real, too, and as utterly contemporary as the daily possibility of violent death.

Then the lawn was all at once striped with great oblongs of light. One of the servants had gone upstairs and was about to lay the table for dinner. So we went upstairs as well, to change out of our riding clothes which suddenly seemed dishevelled and uncomfortable.

[Photographs by the author.]

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TIME & TIDE—NINEPENCE ON FRIDAYS

A Last Word

BY WILLIAM SANSON

THE house was owned by Henry Cadwaller. It was tall and grey and windowed black ; it rose, and was now falling, in the Fulham area, and its presently visible name, DWALLER HO, suggested much of its function—a dwelling-house where people might dawdle to death, with a Ho to summon the aged and weary to its door.

Henry Cadwaller was a man of thrift, and the old gold letters lost from the fanlight of the original HOUSE had never been replaced nor had half the black-and-white tiles on the steps, nor the stained glass lights to his hallway. These red and yellow and purple panes, patched nowadays with wood and cardboard, shed a more gothic gloom than ever : indeed the whole house was patched, its large Victorian rooms were partitioned with papered three-ply—each lodger lay and stared at his own piece of ceiling frieze, coming from nowhere and disappearing with mad purpose—and the curtains of many of the windows had once patently been tablecloths—or why the ink-stain at the top, why the vertical fringe ?—and the bedcovers were unmistakably made from old curtains—or should bedcovers have ring-slots, and widen towards one end ? Plaster fell freely from the grey façade, and was helped on its way by abandoned wireless aerials that flapped wearily down the walls from window-sills lined with meat-safes and milk-bottles ; the garden at the back was a rot of thistles, crates, cans and the shattered glass of the old conservatory, now a plywood bathroom ; on the roof the chimneys chatted in all directions, and on the walls cowed ventilators sprouted anywhere like an iron mushroom growth ; in the old hallway the little fireplace once used to warm the footman's rump now held empty bottles and a pair of galoshes, and on the front-door there were pinned, like the notes of

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a white up-ended dulcimer, thin strips of card announcing the names against bakelite bell-pushes of fifteen lodgers.

These bells were a source of much irritation to Mr. Cadwaller : a long time ago he had had them fixed to save himself trouble at the front-door—but had overlooked the fact that each time a bell rang the cost of a small electric impulse went down on his bill. There were some days—on Monday morning when various laundries called, or on Saturday when the coming and going was something appalling—when he sat in his front-room holding his hands over his ears to deafen this costly tolling. And sometimes, driven to absurd measures, he would run to the door when he saw a van arrive simply to save that insistent ringing whose every vibration cost money—yet never without his pan and brush, in case a horse had passed to drop manure for his window-box. He liked milk-carts, and only ordered coal from a company that still employed the old, be-stallioned drays.

Of all these bells one angered him more than any other : and that was Mr. Horton's. Mr. Horton, a retired merchant, seldom had visitors ; but always—and Mr. Cadwaller knew well by now that it was out of malice—he rang his bell before entering the house. To test it, he explained.

Mr. Horton was the scourge of Mr. Cadwaller's life : and thus perhaps its main stimulus. A feud had begun months previously, shortly after Mr. Horton had arrived, in the bathroom. Throughout the house, Cadwaller had had the overflow-holes in each bath reset three inches lower : expensive, but a reasonable outlay thus to lower authoritatively the level of each lodger's bath and save on the cost of hot water. And then one morning he had entered a bathroom just quitted by Mr. Horton. And he had seen the dark ring left high up above the overflow line.

He studied it, had the overflow tested, and then lay in wait. Each time Mr. Horton had a bath he left the same high ring. At length Cadwaller could stand it no longer. " You put your foot over it ! " he said, catching Mr. Horton in the passage.

" Beg pardon ? "

" Your foot ! " He pointed through the door to the bath. " You keep it there."

It was a second of enormous understanding. Each man sized the other, recognised his intention, grasped his game.

Mr. Horton made no attempt to prevaricate ; he closed his eyelids and sighed, before passing along the passage.

"I cannot, Mr. Cadwaller, help my sponge floating to the farther end of the bath. If," his voice rose, "you can call it a bath."

From then on it was war, cold and subtle war. Cadwaller considered, of course, serving Mr. Horton his notice. But the rooms were not all full, it would be his own loss : and did he really want Mr. Horton to go ? For that flash of mutual understanding had been of deep significance—as though twins of some kind had found each other. Both recognised his brother in thrift—and both were as suddenly aware of a physical resemblance. Their thrift, their almost acrobatic thrift—what others might call 'mean-ness,' though where does mean-ness begin and thrift end?—might have been apparent before : Mr. Cadwaller might have noticed the amount of free samples that made up most of Mr. Horton's mail, and Mr. Horton might have taken more notice of Mr. Cadwaller's brush and pan. Indeed idly they must have remarked these and a number of other matters ; for now, in a sudden retrogressive flash, each totted up the other's account—and such was the intensity of the moment that each realised for the first time something else, they recognised their more than strong physical resemblance. Standing in the dim, daylit, room-smelling passage, the one in an old brown dressing-gown, the other in his tweed jacket fortified everywhere with leather—they faced each other like mirrors, two tall stooping grey-haired gentlemen each mumbling on a long jutting, petulant, prognathous jaw.

On a long pale turnip of a jaw, on small bottom teeth monkeying forwards and under a drooping grey moustache disguising the short hare-like upper lip. It was as if, in the pale light of some curious asylum out of time and place, Valentin-le-Desossé had met the Habsburg Charles II.

The formation of Charles II's jaw compelled that poor man to eat no solid food, he was fed on liquid hominies. Not so Mr. Horton : he liked his liquids, and the stronger the better, but he liked to eat too. This proved a matter of further contention ; for Mr. Cadwaller ran a profitable dining-room downstairs, and Mr. Horton liked his

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food, when he ate it there, very well done. But Mr. Cadwaller liked his guests to eat their food half-raw, it saved gas. And here was this Horton consistently sending his back to be burnt! That is, when he ate it there. For upstairs there was a no-cooking-in-the-rooms rule: and from beneath Mr. Horton's door there crept into the linoleumed, lincrustaed passage the most eloquent odours. Yet how could this be done? No trivet for the gas-fire, no gas-ring. Cadwaller even looked outside the window, as if Horton might have been an alcoholic hanging out his bottle, his gas-ring, on a nail. However carefully Mr. Cadwaller searched, he never found the answer. For Mr. Horton cooked, beneath a tent of sheets, on an electric blanket.

Thus these two long-jawed gentlemen went to war: finesse of economy became their touchstone, they tried to outdo each other at every move—and the sphere widened, they openly criticised each other's tactics in fields outside any personal engagement. Thus, when on one morning of strong sunshine Mr. Horton looked in on Cadwaller and found him sitting in a chair in front of which was spread newspapers to prevent the sunshine fading the carpet, and moreover moving round the room with the newspaper and his chair as the poisonous beautiful sunlight travelled round, and moreover trying to do his pools at the same time—Mr. Horton was able to scoff at him for dispersing his concentrative powers. "You'll never hit the jackpot that way," he said. "Why not spread the paper all over?"

"Because I like to look at my carpet," Cadwaller growled. "What's the use of buying a carpet and not looking at it? Besides, I need the paper for the boiler."

"You could burn the paper later."

"Eh?" Cadwaller had not thought of that. But quickly, "I suppose you want me to go out and buy papers to put on the carpet?"

"Chuck away seventy thousand quid if you like. I don't care."

And for a moment Mr. Cadwaller would think he was really losing seventy thousand; and they would pause facing each other wildly, big turnip chins raised and trembling like the masks of warrior-ants.

All such arguments, absurd as they always became, were distinguished by the one cardinal difference between them: Cadwaller's thrift was immediate, the act of expenditure itself gave him unbearable

pain ; while Horton held the long view, he never minded shelling out if finally profits might be reaped. He liked to foresee things. Thus Horton would with much misgiving pay the registration fee on a parcel, realising the payment that otherwise must be made in time, fares and shoe-leather : but Cadwaller could not put that shilling on the counter—and took instead tenpence worth of bus fares, and lost time and shoe-leather into a bad bargain. And while Cadwaller wore his old coat out and stitched leather into the elbow-holes, cuffs and neck—Horton foresaw the necessity of this and simply had the arms from his chairs removed. (Trouble there, they were Cadwaller's chairs ; but Horton made him a footstool of the arms, to save the wear and tear of bedroom slippers.)

As is natural, this common ground brought them much together, not as friends, not exactly as enemies—perhaps more like passionate chess-players. They could never resist each other's company. Their blood rose to each meeting. They went to the Sales together, where there was much argument as to what was true 'clearance' and what was cheap stock brought in for the sale : and whereas neither bought much, Cadwaller would fall eventually for something he did not want at all, simply because it was so very heavily reduced, while Horton bought necessities, seeing the heat of summer through a winter's fog, or even buying two things, like a piece of mirror and a picture frame, which he could put together to make something of three times the original value.

On such expeditions they would sometimes lunch together, and both, as often happens with 'mean' people, wanted a taste of each other's plates. And so, after a few hair-raising encounters when one or the other was served a larger or more appetising helping, they agreed to order two plates of different dishes and two empty plates as well and then divide exactly both taste and helping. It proved an efficient solution—and if a more plentiful helping of something else passed them on its way to another table, then it was bad luck, it was painful and as pain must be forgotten. What could not be forgotten was a difference between them on the matter of alcohol. Needless to say that they paid for their own : Cadwaller always ordered mild beer, slow long pints of mild beer, perhaps three, but each occasioning an equally mild outlay and each worth its weight

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in drinking-time : but Horton ordered a small whisky in a large glass, believing in the greater toxic value of spirits, and watched with joy the publican's knuckles whiten as he pressed home the free soda-water. His joy was thus only confined by Cadwaller's presence, for Cadwaller too enjoyed the publican's discomfort, but at his, Horton's, expense.

Thus life continued, in and out of Dwaller Ho. The two great chins, the downdrawn moustaches faced each other and fiddled, fought it out. Ring up TIM ? Nonsense, ring up a friend, combine a chat with the time. Take out your sister ? Take her in a *taxi* to a cheap restaurant—the taxi'll do all the plinthing she needs. Keep the veg water for soup ? But what of the reducing costs, the expanding gas bill ? Tip the waiter a bit more to get a bigger helping next time ? But what if all that money goes in a common pool ? Switch out the hall-lights when no one's there ? But the poor filaments they make these days—and what of the switches anyway, what of *deterioration*, wear, my God, and tear ? And keep the Ascot pilot flame going to warm the place.

As time went on, and in early summer, that fruitful time that follows the mortal months, Cadwaller killed himself.

They had argued about horse-shoes and motor-tyres : shoe-ing a horse cost exactly twice the cost of motor-tyres over the same distance. Four treads each. Deep in this and adjacent problems of shoe-leather, Cadwaller, during February, unfortunately in that year filldyke, refused to have his walking shoes repaired until the holes achieved a reasonable importance, like the size of the yolk of a flat-fried egg : one could walk on inclined welts. But welts or no those holes let water, he caught cold, it lingered, he refused fires and hot-water bottles during the deepening bronchial troubles, there were developments, and in the latter middle of a starless night he died all by himself in the dark, not wishing to turn the light on or ring for his nurse.

Birds were singing in those days. The guests at Dwaller Ho were upset, despite the discomfort to which, in their creaking partitions, amid their personal sounds and their occasional smells, they had always been put. But even so most of them felt more for poor Mr. Horton than for the dead Cadwaller himself. For they knew that neither could live happily without the other. They had all recognised how much each had meant to the other ; neither old man had ever tried

to hide their curious rivalry, and it was a local joke. Yet not only a joke ; it was touching, too, in its way—and now there was poor Mr. Horton alone, bereft of his adversary, his playmate. He sat at his window, the early summer sunshine too fresh for his worn skin and his grey hair, and more than ever that long jaw seemed to press his mouth closed, always as if he were offended and refused to speak, as if he were the little boy left out of the game, alone and with no one to play with.

But if the sight of him then was touching, his fellow-guests were really moved on the day of the funeral. For early that morning Mr. Horton was seen to pick his way through the broken glass and old crates and rubbish of the garden to a single flowering bush at the end wall. He carried a knife. He stood by the bush for some minutes, staring at it, then looking at the knife in his hand, as if he were considering whether it was worthwhile to risk the blade. Then his shoulders suddenly shook—the poor old fellow couldn't be weeping ? —and he bent down and cut off a branch of flowers. Another and another. And finally turned, his head bowed, and carried back to the house an armful of blossom.

Everyone knew his intention. And though they smiled to see this final economy and murmured that Cadwaller would turn six feet beneath when these his own flowers cut free of charge touched his grave—nevertheless they were deeply moved by old Horton's thought.

The day of the funeral was one of sunshine and fresh warmth, a pale and lovely day of early flowering summer. There were few mourners : but when the hearse drew up at the cemetery gates, and the little file of people came in ones and twos up the asphalt path, lost and at a loss among so vast a civic sea of marble and granite—Mr. Horton was already there standing at a respectful distance away from the yellow mound of new-turned clay. The grave was like any hole in the ground—only the mourners, and they much more than the coffin, gave it presence and meaning. And of the mourners, Mr. Horton, a sad figure and the older for the fresh blossom held in his hand, seemed in his resemblance to the dead man and in the memory the others had of the two together to sanctify the moment more than the priest, the fair weather, the grave.

A short service was read, the coffin lowered : and then, when the

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carpet of green grass had been finally placed over the grave, Mr. Horton went forward alone to place his flowers on his old companion's last resting-place. He stood for a minute, head bowed, in silent prayer. Then turned and walked, a solitary figure, away into the years of loneliness.

They watched him go, they saw the last of him turn out through the cemetery gates. But nobody, naturally, saw the giant chuckle beneath Mr. Horton's bowed shoulders : nobody knew the true nature of his last tribute, his bloom, his last word, *Rubus idæus*, the common raspberry.

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Episodes of Autobiography

BY RICHARD CHURCH

The Aquarium.

It was the First of January, 1900 : New Year's Day : New Century's Day. But that portentous fact was of no interest to two little boys walking with extreme care and anxiety across Battersea Bridge at half-past three in the afternoon.

Their concern was immediate, for the elder brother, a small fellow of eleven, with a large nose, brown eyes, and a sallow skin that gave him a Spanish cast, was carrying an aquarium.

This task so occupied him that his follower, the brother who shadowed his life and for whom he usually felt solemnly responsible, was for the moment forgotten.

This did not disturb the junior, for he too was as anxious, and as signally concentrated, as his brother. Though only seven years old, he carried the burden of life with gravity. His nose was smaller than his brother's, and it was somewhat pinched, the nostrils white and enlarged. This made the red cheeks all the more noticeable : and it may have added to the fiery light of his eyes, which were also brown.

Rather short of breath, from excitement and not from haste, he trotted along close to his brother, from time to time putting out a worried hand and grasping the elder's coat-tail, only to be shrugged off with a muttered exclamation of " Stop it ! You'll make me drop it ! "

He appeared to understand this abruptness, for his brother, always sardonic even in affection, was inclined to be sharply irritable in moments of stress.

And how tense, how critical was this particular moment ! It marked a stage, a peak-point, in their lives. Both had longed, through childhood's infinity of time, for a goldfish. Their father, however,

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was so boyishly concerned with his own enthusiasms, that he had ignored this longing. Their mother was by experience and temperament so generally apprehensive that she hesitated before committing herself, or her children, to the caring for livestock. There was already a cat in the house, and she had made this excuse for banning the buying of a goldfish. She said that the cat would hook it out of the bowl and eat it, thus adding to the general redness and toothiness of nature, under whose menace she was convinced that her two boys were doomed to fulfil their fragile destinies.

This timid philosophy, however, had been shaken by a touch of kindness; and kindness from a humble quarter. One of the father's many colleagues in the South-west District Post Office had been prematurely pensioned after having his wits permanently addled by a blow on the head from the lid of a post-van. The poor man, semi-speechless and existing in a mental vacuum, fortunately possessed a sensible wife who happened to be handsome in a pre-Raphaelite way. She got a job as caretaker in the house of the American artist Abbey, in Tite Street, Chelsea, where she lived in the spacious basement with her little daughter and her now wholly innocent husband.

The boys' father still befriended this man, for he had a strong *esprit de corps* (a characteristic which will be explained later), and appeared to be personally intimate with several hundred of his fellow mail-sorters in the red brick building behind Victoria Street, adjoining the site where the Byzantine cathedral of Westminster was at that time being built.

Regular visits were paid to the retired comrade in the comfortable basement in Tite Street, and on occasion, the two boys were taken along too, the father having a sentimental pride in his youngsters.

So it was that the craving for a goldfish became known to the wife of the stricken man. She may have spoken to her employer about it, for a message at Christmas had said that if the boys came over the river to Tite Street one afternoon, she would have a surprise for them.

That younger brother being myself, I can now recall, with envy, the shudder of excitement with which I crossed the river that day, chattering to my silent brother, who even at that time was something of an enigma, and an oracle, to me. My attitude was not unusual, for

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a child's world, while being timeless and spaceless, is also closely hedged-in by fear, brevity of attention, lack of association of ideas and experience, and all the rest of the unattempted potentials of the infant consciousness.

My universe was still centred in my mother's fragrant person ; her lap, her caress, her hair and eyes so curiously the same nut-brown colour, warm and glowing. The garments she took off—the apron, the dropped handkerchief—shone for a while with her light, and I would touch them with rapture, beside myself with love. She and these detachable attributes were like the sun and his flakes of fire. The further I got from her, the colder and darker fell my living days and nights. And the fall was rapid : so small was my own supply of vitality, the confidence of flesh and bone.

Thus my realisation of the outside world was confined to a few streets around our little semi-detached house in the marshes of Battersea, between the famous Park, and the old parish church that stood out on a curve in the river. I seldom ventured as far as the park or the church ; they were shadowy, foreign. A vague obscurity closed about me much nearer home. I doubt if, at that age of seven years my world was more than a quarter of a mile in radius, though I was frequently carried beyond that small area of light by my parents, the outer dimness being penetrated during such excursions by the all-powerful light-beams of their divine authority.

A lesser power, but wholly trustworthy, was my brother Jack, whose taciturnity I took for granted, never questioning the oddness that made this lad of eleven so different from both our parents. They were happy people ; my father a perpetual boy. He seemed to be a creature released, like a colt from a stable, and he galloped about the paddock of life with a thunder of hoofs and a flashing of nostrils, drinking the very air and intoxicating himself on it.

My mother, the fountain of Father's confidence and hilarity, was demonstrative, passionate, and subject to storms of jealousy. But her mind was cool, and her moral courage infinite. It was she, therefore, who made the home and held the world in place. In spite of this Atlas-burden and responsibility, she was capable of gaiety, moods that suffused her brown eyes, parted her lips, and revealed her faintly prominent teeth, so that she became sylvan, a woodland creature,

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with just that small reservation of autumnal reminder that woodland creatures can never wholly discard.

Just as my brother's eyes were of a darker brown than my mother's, so what was in her nature merely a reservation, a reminder, became in his a background of melancholy. He appeared to have been born against it, and he remained there all his life. It cast a slight shadow before him, so that in spite of his *absolute* nature, his air of distinction and authority, he appeared to be always in retreat, elusive, deprecatory.

So we set out on that New Year's Day, with our characteristic definition, in a timeless world symbolically reflected in the wayward course with which my memory returns to it half a century later.

My brother walked as if he were concentrating upon walking, distrustful of his ability, or perhaps of the ground in front of him. This made his replies to my chatter somewhat delayed and perfunctory. But I did not mind; I was used to his temperament, and accepted it as I accepted the leaves on the trees.

My brother refused to quicken his pace, though, as I knew, he was as eager as myself: more so, indeed, for to him the goldfish was only one factor in a large prospect; large and constructive. For as I was to learn, his aim was to establish a *real* aquarium, with fresh water-scape scenery of strange, sodden greens, coralline grottoes, mosses, rondures, recesses, mournful weeds, sandy beds, pitted with glints of mica, animated with caddis-worms and mollusc; the silk-tinted water peopled not with *one* goldfish, but a number ranging in size, form, colour as various as a flight of Titania's fairies.

My brother was one who looked ahead, and liked things to be in proportion and complete. That may be why he walked with such grave attention to his footsteps, head bent and deliberate of mien.

Finally, our measured procedure brought us across the river to Chelsea, where at once we were in so foreign a land that I shrank closer to the side of my familiar Virgil, even daring to grasp his hand and cling to it, as we turned a little way along the Embankment, passing what seemed to me at that time the vast mansions whose inhabitants were beings so fabulous that my mind did not attempt to envisage them. I did not even think of them as rich, or high-born, for those categories had not yet reached me.

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But I was not intimidated ; merely nervous at the remoteness, the *difference* of this tall and silent district from the cosy, working-class streets of houses so far away across the river, my native land. Indeed, I felt some half-sense of recognition, as though a self beyond myself welcomed these huge doorways, these noble windows, recalling them as familiar to a way of life impossible to a Battersea-born child, but which I must have known.

I was half-conscious of this while we made our way to Tite Street, I still clinging to my brother's hand, though my fears were assuaged by this other sensation ; dim enough, but before the afternoon ended, to be unforgettably brought forward to the front of my mind, and kept there for later cogitation when, later on, life brought some possible evidence to explain its genesis.

We were met at the area door by Mrs. Langton, the caretaker. Going down a flight of stone stairs off the street level was interesting to me, though I had made this adventure several times before. I knew what I should find : the wide spaces, the low ceilings in the great kitchen with its dresser armoured with copper pots and pans and silver-plate. I knew that I should find Mr. Langton sitting in a wooden armchair to the left of the vast cooking range (as big as our whole kitchen at home across the river), with a shawl over his knees. He would be staring patiently out of the window at the whitewashed wall and the door to the cellars under the pavement : staring without seeing, sometimes nodding his head gravely and saying "Yes ! Yes !" with an eagerness that only his patient wife could comprehend. For though she usually took no notice of these void ejaculations, there would sometimes be such an added emphasis in her husband's otherworld assents that she would smile at him, and murmur soothingly, "There, duck ! There now !" in tones so gentle that he would give her a fleeting but hopeful glance, then subside again into his trappist rumination.

All this my brother and I found, as expected, on that New Century's Day. We also found Gracie, the Langtons' daughter, a year or two older than myself, and even more sedate. She was red-haired, like her father, and her temperament seemed to be conditioned by the fate that had overtaken him, for she had about her an air of the Sleeping Princess, an almost inhumanly quiet simplicity, that made her an apt

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companion to her father. Mrs. Langton seemed to understand her also, and to be content to live with, and minister to, a husband and daughter dedicated to silence, or near-silence, and comparative inanition.

Maybe Mrs. Langton was glad, from time to time, to escape from this cloistral company, and to release a flood of pent-up conversation, rich with endearments, that bewildered my brother and me, while warming us to her as a kind soul who made the outside world almost as comprehensible, and as trustworthy, as our own home.

We greeted her shyly, and Mr. Langton and Gracie still more shyly. We were not afraid of them. We were not even fully conscious that they were 'different.' We merely took them at face value; and it was a blank face. Mr. Langton gave us his usual swift glance that just failed to carry a smile of recognition. Then he returned to that interior retreat which he had inhabited since his accident. What kind of man he had been before that sudden climacteric, we were too young to ask. It was in the past; and when one is seven years old, or even eleven, the past is of no account, unless it be lighted by a myth, and even then its scenery is fitful and murky. We were not concerned to speculate about the strangeness of a man's whole nature being obliterated by a single blow on the head, and his small daughter too being removed from normal social conduct by the same event.

Gracie smiled at us, and showed us the new doll which had been her Christmas present from Mr. Abbey, the artist upstairs who was so different from people of our kind that he needed this great house to live in alone. We did not ask how he managed to do so; how he paid for it all, and the servants that looked after it and waited on him during his infrequent visits there. For we never saw him. He remained a legend, a god-like figure, spoken of as something absolute, unaccountable. He must have been kind, and he must have been rich. We could appreciate and gauge the former attribute. The latter was still outside our field of consciousness, for in our home money was not discussed, it was merely saved, or apportioned out, there being no question of *making* money, of increasing by even one penny the salary of something under £150 earned by our father as a minor Civil Servant, or the £100 a year paid to our harassed, over-worked but happy mother as a teacher in one of the London Board Schools, in the

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Battersea Park Road, rougher even than the one we attended in a side street called Surrey Lane.

So we admired Gracie's doll, and I did not disguise my un-boyish interest in its eyes that opened and closed with a bland innocence, and a loud click. Then we were each given a piece of iced cake, a luxury never known at home, this being preface to an invitation to be 'taken upstairs' to see the studio and drawing-room.

I followed my brother, who followed Mrs. Langton, Gracie being left contentedly to play with her doll and to keep company with her father, the one with orbs that could ogle in a mechanical way, the other with eyes comparatively expressionless.

We walked along the basement passage, past several closed doors, and one that stood open upon a boiler-room where I could see a faint glow round the door of the furnace. The oil-cloth, with a plain blue border (so different from the Greek-key pattern of the stair-covering at home), was continued up the flight of dark stairs which led to a landing, facing a door covered in green baize.

Mrs. Langton pushed open this door, and ushered us on under her outstretched arm. We entered another world, like Gulliver entering the land of the giants. A vast hall soared above us, with a correspondingly vast front door at the end of it. I drew in my breath sharply. I must have given a gasp that Mrs. Langton misconstrued as fear, for she bent down and kissed me, and took me by the hand, leaving my silent brother to follow us.

She approached a tall, wide door on the left, opened it by turning first the key and then the china knob, and led us into the studio.

Here was something still more gargantuan. I stopped, and Mrs. Langton was forced to stop with me, so forceful was my reaction. Jack trod on my heel, and impatiently pushed me in the back. But I did not move. I stared. I stared up, into the vault, a height such as I had never seen before. I stared at the huge north-light, that sloped over part of the vaulting and then came down straight almost to floor level. A black blind was drawn *up* from the floor to about the height of my head, but a tear in it revealed the glass behind.

The sun shone on a naked tree outside, with a golden light that struck back into the studio; but it did not warm the great space, or fill the emptiness. Yet I was neither chilled nor repelled by this

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austerity. Looking up into the shadowy height, I felt that I was returning to something just right, a place where I could breathe and move without restraint.

"Oh!" I cried, in a hollow, round voice; and I flung up my arm in a gesture of magnificence that made Mrs. Langton study me with surprise and amusement. She gave me a playful hug.

"What? You like it?" she said. "This bare old place; dusty, and cold as charity?"

I didn't know what she meant by 'cold as charity,' but I could see the dust, a pallid mantle on the tops of stacks of picture-frames turned to the wall; on a huge easel on four wheels; on odd chairs and stools; on a piano loaded with piles of papers, books, portfolios; on a long sofa at the other end of the studio, raised on a dais. The only object free from this indoor frost was a life-size lay-figure in a velvet robe, with a cape of brown-paper pinned round the shoulders.

Mrs. Langton saw me studying this.

"Sharp eyes! Sharp eyes!" she said, and squeezed my small body again. "They don't miss much, I'll lay! But I have to keep her clean. It wouldn't seem right!"

I knew what she meant, for I lived in a home where scrubbing and dusting were a daily routine in which my brother and I had to play our parts. We never questioned these duties, any more than we questioned the round of mealtimes, or the ritual of going to bed.

"Well, that's where he does his painting," said Mrs. Langton. "Shabby old barn: but he won't have anything touched."

It wasn't shabby to my eyes; and I had never seen a barn, so I could not compare it. I saw a noble chamber that was just right; much more acceptable and liveable-in, than the cosy little rooms at home, over-crowded with furniture, and ferns.

No doubt in recalling those distant scenes I am translating them into the language and concepts of adult life; but the only original I have to work on is what the child saw, and felt. One of the most vivid of these tributaries is that unaccountable moment of recognition, that sense of returning to a place whose *dimensions* were more familiar, more fitting, than those of my home; and that home one where all was secure in confidence and unrestrained love. "You'll catch your death, and Mother won't thank me for that," said Mrs. Langton,

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shepherding us back to the hall, and leading the way to the drawing-room.

Here again I was joyously puzzled by the sense of space, though I missed the great height of the studio, and the soaring window whose lifted lights had carried me up to that moment of something near delirium, making me want to sing, or burst into tears, though I had been too timid to do either.

This great room slumbered in semi-darkness, for Venetian blinds were drawn down, with slats half-closed, so that we saw shapes of sheeted furniture, striped with shadow. My memory of this is equally vague, but I recall some statuary, and a carved fireplace flanked by two vases taller than myself. These great pots were understandably recognised, for in our parlour at home we had two vases, on a smaller scale, that stood exactly thus, one on each side of the fireplace, like two of the oil-jars in the story of Ali Baba. I used to peer into these, imagining strange contents conjured by the faint musty smell that hovered over those circular mouths, as a whiff of smoke hangs over a sleeping volcano.

We did not remain long, staring at this twilight splendour under a shroud. Taking Mrs. Langton's "Well now!" as a signal, we followed her down to the basement, where we ceremoniously said goodbye to Mr. Langton and Gracie (rather a one-sided ritual) and were led by our hostess to the area door. On a shelf beside it, where tradesmen left their goods, stood the surprise which had been promised us; the aquarium.

What puzzles me now is that instantly we knew what it was; for we had never seen goldfish in anything but small glass bowls, in the window of a shop at a crossroads called The Latchmere, a sinister junction that always filled me with dread, perhaps because one of the radiations from it led past a candle-factory, where Mr. Price made his world-famous nightlights. The ugly building with its ranks of inhuman windows, and the rancid smell that sank from them over the pavements, so that they appeared to be permanently greasy and cold, like dirty plates after a dinner of mutton, must have been offensive to my virgin eyes and nostrils. I shuddered whenever I approached The Latchmere, and sniffed that dull, rank odour.

We stood spellbound by that area door. Neither of us dared

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believe in our hope, for gifts from the outside world seldom came our way. Indeed, nothing of much account came our way from beyond the four walls of home. We were a close community of four, on guard against some invisible peril, so that all our family happiness (and it was a constant feast) had something of the Syracusan banquet at which Damocles sat beneath a naked sword suspended by a single horse-hair.

Somebody had to make a move, however. It was my brother who broke the spell. His taciturnity for once gave way under pressure of this long-nurtured passion. His dark, full eyes flashed, the long lashes flickered, and he spoke.

"It's an aquarium," he whispered. And he repeated it; teaching me something.

"Is it any use to you?" asked Mrs. Langton. Her question had the intended rhetorical effect, for my brother put on his cap, and I dragged on my tasselled tam-o-shanter, while Mrs. Langton opened the door. "Now go steady," she said, and gave me a final hug as I followed my brother, who had seized the aquarium in his bare hands, and was groping his way up the area steps, stubbing his toes on the risers because his attention was wholly concentrated upon the precious burden, the almost holy burden.

Once he stumbled and might have fallen backwards to disaster, but was saved by his own powerful infatuation, which gave him a sixth sense, and a superhuman authority over the laws of nature, especially that of gravity.

I was also there to steady him from beneath. Thus, an uneasy tandem, we reached street level, and did not even turn to wave good-bye to Mrs. Langton, who had cried out in alarm at the near-disaster on the steps. We did not realise that we had failed to thank her, an omission that haunted us later when we got home, and Mother inquired "And what did Mrs. Langton say when you thanked her?" It was always her habit to want to know what people said, and to be given verbatim the whole of a conversation in which she had not taken part because of her absence from that particular drama.

Now began the balanced pursuit of the journey home. I have described how we ordered it, with Jack leading the way, like a priest of one of the more austere brotherhoods carrying the Host, or a

casket of reliquary bones ; I, a nervous acolyte, grasping his coat-tails.

Tite Street and Chelsea Embankment were empty, and the day was dying under a shroud of frost. Through this fawn-grey world we made our way, moving with spasmodic slowness, the spasms due to bursts of eager excitement, our desire to get home safely with the aquarium, tempered by fear of dropping it.

At the back of my mind lurked a greater fear. I knew that once across the Bridge, we were likely to encounter schoolfellows, bands of marauding freebooters of the Battersea gutters, ripe for any action, so long as it was destructive. I knew that the sight of a large glass aquarium in the arms of a boy somewhat more warmly dressed than themselves would rouse their hunting gusto.

For the moment, however, I was sufficiently concerned with the immediate cares. I saw the signs of strain on my brother's face. His huge nose was blue, his eyes even more cavernous than usual. He had forgotten, in his excitement, to put on his gloves before leaving, and now was unable to do so, the idea of committing the aquarium to my hands, even for a moment, being quite unrealistic.

Within five minutes of our setting out, his hands were lifeless with cold. I watched them, my attention rigid with sympathy. For even at eleven years of age, my brother was fastidious about his hands ; kept them clean, as though they were objects of *virtu* exterior to his person. This odd habit, as I discovered later, was an unconscious precursor of other remarkable characteristics soon to develop. Already, however, not only my attention but that of many adults had been drawn to the exquisite shapeliness of my brother's hands ; their sensitive veins, their slimness, the proportion of the long fingers, the almond-shaped nails which our mother proudly trimmed once a fortnight, and smoothed round with pumice-stone. I too had to submit to this minor torture, which caused us both to set our teeth, in order to prevent ourselves from dribbling, as a sort of reflex action.

To see Jack's hands clasping the cold metal and glass, and growing stiff in nervous tension, and clay-like under the insidious caress of the falling night-frost, filled me with foreboding. I could have shed a few tears ; but I dared not. It was as much as I could do to keep up with his wolf-like flight. For he too was apprehensive of a

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thousand dangers. The air was full of swords, and treachery waited at every street corner. I watched those hands, studied the signs of numbness, the dead-white of the knuckles, the earthy pallor of the finger nails as the blood fled from the combined attack of frost without, and morbid concentration within.

So intent were we both, that neither remarked on the splendour in which that first day of a new century was closing. Safely reaching Battersea Bridge, we waited for a horse-bus to clatter past, the sound of the hooves dropping a half-tone as they struck hollow on the bridge. Then we crossed to the up-river pavement; an instinctive move, because that was also the home-side. Thus, over the parapet, which was just about at my eye-level, we saw the river as a long stream of troubled fire. The tide must have been up and on the turn, for the waters were weltering like a den of snakes, breaking and scattering the reflection of the sunset, in a contusion of angry browns, reds and purples, shot with sparks and needles of white-hot steel.

Both colours and sounds affected me and I remember still how I struggled with the conflict of emotions while we crossed the bridge; fear for the worshipped brother, terror of the almost certain ambush that would bring destruction to our treasure, rapture before the glory of sky and water; and behind all these sharp and immediate sensations a remote, racial dread at the fall of the winter day.

So we crossed the bridge; and at every passing of a horse-bus, or a brewers' dray, the pavement trembled, the aquarium trembled, and we trembled.

After that, all went well, a fortunate diversion saving us from the attention of the Battersea gangs. My brother thought it safer to keep to the main road, where there was likely to be more adult life, and even a policeman or two on their beat. We had to turn right at the *Rising Sun*, a public house standing at the corner of Surrey Lane, near two old country cottages set amid trees in gardens large enough to give a rustic touch to this stony suburb.

We were now in our home country, or at least on its outskirts, and my small-radius instincts came to life again: with that life, alas, the certainty of trouble ahead. For our local streets, thickly populated by lower middle-class, artisan, and labouring folk, was prolific in children who ignored these three social barriers, and swarmed together like

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wild bees, buzzing about the neighbourhood in search of the honey of adventure. And by a miracle of ingenuity and ruthlessness, they found it.

The social mixture, the range and variety of talent and background were remarkable. Political theorists, especially Left-wing theorists, are apt to write of the great class-groups as though they are homogeneous; but in reality they are subject to a constant, osmotic infiltration, each into the other, under the leakage of chance, and the pressure or degeneration of individual character. I recall that in our little side-street, shopless and wholly residential, consisting perhaps of not more than fifty houses, each a family home, there were Irish, Scottish, Cockney, provincial stocks; some poor, rough and brutal, others comfortable, scrupulous in religious and social observance. Sometimes this disparity existed between adjoining households; usually, birds of a feather flocked together street by street, or even street-ends. Our own street, for example, consisted mainly of the families of skilled artisans, minor Civil Servants, white-collar workers of the more servile kind, wage-slaves because of their low mental equipment, and submissive temperaments: salt of the earth: and like grains of salt, not especially distinguishable from each other, except in the intimacy and temporary safety of their own homes.

Almost opposite us lived an Aberdeen family named Ritchie, consisting, like us, of the parents and two sons, half a generation senior to us. The father was a lift-maker. So was his elder son, but the young man's spare-time occupation was the making of violins, a hobby which has since brought him a unique and particular fame in the technical room of the house of music.

A few doors from the Ritchies lived a bluff, square-bearded old man who came to our house whenever a window-pane needed to be replaced. His name was Froude, and one day when I was watching, entranced by the scratch of the diamond glass-cutter, he told me that he came from Devonshire, and had not done too well by the migration to London, for his home had been a grand old hall by the River Dart, "smaller and swifter than Father Thames" he said. And his brother was a historian, and had made himself widely known. This name stuck in my magpie memory, unassociated until many years later.

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Still on that same side of the street, which to me at seven years of age was the beginning of the foreign world, and therefore slightly suspect, lived an ex-soldier, his wife and daughter. How he got a living I am not sure, but I believe that he was some sort of door-keeper, or commissionaire. He was a fine figure of a man, bolt upright, and he marched off every morning at the same time as we were running to school. His front door slammed as he jerked it, then came the clang of the iron gate by the palings, and left-right, left-right, he was up the street and gone, looking neither to right nor left. His name was Macdonald, and his brother General Hector Macdonald was a current hero during these days of the Boer War. This General's square face figured on the little celluloid portrait buttons which we collected and pinned on our coats or jerseys; of General Roberts, Buller, White, or Baden-Powell somewhat different because he wore a strange hat since become familiar in the Boy Scout gear.

Here, then, were two examples of the upward and downward interplay between the social and functional classes; confusing to the theorists, and those politicians who are anxious to standardise peoples, the better to control them, and ride on top.

My brother and I, meanwhile, have been left fugitive through the dusk of the back streets of Battersea, still not out of danger. We were made aware of this as we passed the end of the lane where our school stood, a three-storey building with cold, expressionless windows, and a faintly Germanic character that must have been a defiltration, down through the whole of English society, from the good intention of the Prince Consort, that apostle of efficient Administration.

A boy hailed us; a big boy whom I did not know. My brother tried to quicken his steps, but by this time he was near exhaustion. The aquarium had become a monster. I could see Jack's arms trembling, and I could feel how the pain had made him set his lips more grimly than usual.

Again the boy hailed us, his voice brawny and powerful with that general-public indifference which in the end is more penetrating than true curiosity. "What-yer got there?" he yelled. The shadows deepened, and the menace gathered. We again tried to hurry, and I struggled to come alongside my brother, to bring a flanking protection to the aquarium.

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Our furtiveness was noticed, however. It was obvious that we had something to hide, and therefore it must be valuable. This Francis Drake of the back streets thereupon gave a brain-piercing whistle, to summon other buccaneers, who must have been lurking in Surrey Lane and the streets that turned off at regular intervals, each the length of two houses and two backyards.

In twos and threes they gathered, with an eleventh-hour reluctance more dreadful than the most eager blood-lust. They came from yards and doorways where they had dispersed, about to go under cover for the night. Darkness had not completely come down over the streets, their 'steep Atlantick', and there was enough twilight for a last adventure. My brother and I, vaguely known to them, never wholly of their brotherhood, were fair game. And at that moment, with our precious cargo exposed in such brittleness, we might have been likened to a fat Spanish galleon sneaking up the Trade Winds, heavy with ingots.

The familiar sinking feeling in my stomach assailed me. Nausea soured my mouth and I wanted to be sick; but an antidote of dull anger kept me going. Jack was now gliding along under the power of a self-hypnosis, the aquarium still safe, still borne aloft with religious awe.

Cries of excitement approached, and the pursuers began to run after us.

We had only two more streets to pass before reaching our own; and our home lay half-way along that. Not many yards, but we were handicapped by terror, and for all the progress we appeared to make, we might have been running backwards, or working a treadmill.

"Come on!" breathed my brother, without a glance to right or left. "Take no notice!"

It was a command, not advice. I braced myself, and released my hold of his coat, thus intending to throw myself to the wolves, in the hope of giving him a momentary advantage.

This act of heroism, however, came to nothing, for as we passed the top of the first of the two remaining streets, the hunted and the pursuers were divided by another drama. I saw my brother look swiftly down the street at a second gang of urchins. It was following a navvy, a hatless figure with features flaming and eyes distorted by

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drink and fear. He was running, and gasping as he ran. One trouser-leg was gartered below the knee, the other had burst the garter, and this gave his flight a clumsy lopsided character that added to the effect of panic.

He turned the corner as we reached it, almost knocking us down. Jack fortunately was a yard ahead, and I spurted to avoid the crash. I heard the man whimpering for breath; and I smelled sweat and beer. I heard too the chorus of jeers and yells from the juvenile furies that followed. But between him and them was the real cause of his flight. It was a woman, ragged and shameful, her hair torn down, her blouse gaping, and one eye laid open and bleeding on her cheek. She was mad with fury, and screaming with pain, plunging blindly to right and left, but striving by sheer power of rage to follow her man who had thus ill-treated her. The mob was at her skirts, urging her on, making an Elizabethan sport of this horror.

It was a lucky intervention for us. Our own pursuers at once joined this larger hunt, and in a moment we were alone, with the uproar dying away along Surrey Lane, in the direction from which we had fled. We did not pause, or look back. I had seen everything in that woman's face; the eyeball hanging on her cheek, and the blood flowing: the degradation of her cries as she cursed her man, and at the same time appealed to him. Such a complication of extremes was beyond my understanding. The worry of it, and the horror at the sight of blood coming after the mixed excitements which had stormed round me so extravagantly since Jack and I left home after the midday meal, now sent me running ahead, crying with hysteria. Jack followed, still master of himself, and still responsible for me. But he was concerned, at the same time, to bring the treasure home safely, and he hardly altered his pace. Our mother, who had grown anxious as darkness began to fall, was at the gate, and I collapsed, shouting incoherently, into her arms, and was instantly sick over the front step.

In the closed world of home, I quickly recovered, for no horrors were entertained there for long. I took this assurance for granted. Now I look back, I see how miraculous was the achievement of my parents, who created it. The most static institution human society has ever known, must surely be the lower middle-class household,

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consisting of a small family, at the slow end of the Victorian era in England. Below that level, the economy, promiscuity and often dire poverty made a close, safe corporation impossible. Above that level, parents were, usually, kept somewhat more at arm's length from their children by the intervention of a servant, or servants, and some degree of intellectual and cultural pre-occupation in their own lives.

But that relatively small group, the lower middle-class, a purgation group between the vast and still increasing masses, and the true middle-class of professional administrative, employing folk, is one which has never been fully explored. A few novelists, Gissing, Wells, Bennett, Swinnerton, have drawn the plush curtain aside, but even these masters of fiction have tended to over-dramatise that odd, quiet, mezzanine floor of the house of man.

I see it, in retrospect, as a phase, a pocket of civilisation utterly quiet and self-sufficient. But I speak out of the limited knowledge characteristic in a child of that little world. Latterday publicists, the economists, the politicians, proclaim that it is a world which has disappeared; those, that is, who have noticed its existence. And they gloat over the fact, because to them it is a dark, obstinate hedgehog in the human menagerie. They say that with their Trade Unions, their Adult Education Movements, their reformed school methods and academic avenues, they have smoked out this unco-operative anti-social group.

But I distrust generalisations, and I will return to the particular, that small citadel once the solid core of the universe, but now vanished with all that it represented; if indeed it represented anything but its own odd, isolated self. Sometimes, in a different world, the world of today, I am tempted to recall that household of my childhood, and to see it again in a modern *ménage* here and there, in the suburbs, and in provincial towns, where, after giving a public lecture, or a reading to a literary society, I make a contact (now as a foreigner, or a Rip van Winkle) with some individual in the audience, or an officer of the organisation, and am invited 'home.' In recognising that home, I am tempted to wonder if two world wars, the decay of Christianity as a moulder of society, the inquisitive penetration of radio and television into domestic privacy, and all the mechanical revolutions

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produced by applied science have yet dislodged the lower middle-class, the human hedgehogs, and filled in their holes.

Neither Jack nor I had a coherent story to tell our mother, and she, alarmed by my behaviour on the threshold, asked no questions. I was carried in, washed, and put to bed, with a hot flat-iron wrapped in a piece of blanket at my feet. A cup of sweet tea reduced my hysteria ; and the familiar comfort of bed, the touch and mere proximity of Mother, her hand on my forehead, her voice a golden command, gradually closed the abyss.

She left me, having turned down the fish-tail flame of gaslight to a tiny spearhead. The bedroom was at the back of the house, overlooking the yard and outhouses. I saw a sickle-moon, banana-coloured in the frosty night ; but it added to the faint glow within the room, so that I need fear no more.

I lay there at peace, mouse-like in my snugness. I could not sleep, however, for I heard Jack and Mother talking in the kitchen below. I was quite happy ; everything forgotten. The moon was kind, shining through my own window, on one of whose panes I had only recently scratched a letter 'D' under Mr. Froude's supervision, with his glass-cutter. The bed was our bed, with the knitted-square black and red quilt made by Mother, and the sheet turned down over it when she ran her fingers through my hair, and leaned over me so that I smelled the deep comfort of her. My brother's pillow, with his flannel nightshirt folded on it, waited beside me, reassuring.

Yet suddenly I began to cry again. [* * * * *]

I heard the kitchen door open, then an exclamation ; the stairs creaked, the door opened, and I was lost in my mother, her arms round me, her voice dangerous with emotion, murmuring with lips touching my ear, my eyes, my cheeks, "What is it : what is it then ? Tell me, tell me now."

But I could not tell her : my mind was confused in this bewilderment of horrors, these primaeval threats. I could only cling to her, moaning, twining my fingers in her soft hair and rapidly making little curls of one strand, then another, and whispering the name "Nancy ! Nancy !" which I had invented for her, and which she had accepted as but another sign of my oddity. I, too, for I was

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already an observer of myself, and marvelled at these unaccountable manifestations.

I could not tell her of the hideous street scene because it had already sunk through my conscious mind, into depths from which it has only now emerged, more than half a century later. Where has the image lain all that time, under the accumulating husks of later experiences, through boyhood, youth, the long years of marriage, parenthood, professional life, combat with circumstance and fate? What has kept it intact, as firm as a beaker found in an Egyptian tomb, or a finger-ring in a Saxon grave, with only the jewel blind? So, too, is this image of that moment in the Battersea side-street faintly dimmed as it comes up out of my buried self; but its form is perfect still, with colours, sounds, gestures almost as vivid as they were during that fugitive second on New Year's Day 1900. If that image has thus survived through all the physical renovation that has changed, again and again, every material cell in my body and brain, might it not have existed before its immediate apparition in that dreadful moment: and may it not survive when the tired machinery of my life shall have come to a standstill? [* * * * *]

Social critics, especially the theorists basing their science on economics and politics, tend to overlook the result of the close, hugger-mugger home atmosphere in the child-life of the great masses. It is that which makes them over-emotional, unadventurous, matriarch-ridden. It makes them gullible too, thin-skinned and hostile, yet at the same time almost embarrassingly kind.

When a boy from such a home meets a public school boy, or when as a man he meets that antagonist further case-hardened by the university, he draws in his horns like a snail. He is intimidated by the hardness, the arrogance of manner, the accent of superiority in the man's voice; the ease, the knowledge with which he commands the situation. The difference is in the age at which the emotional weaning takes place. With the English middle-class child it is usually too soon, so that his sensibility is permanently blunted by the shock. With the child from the small home, the weaning comes too late, or never. But I am writing of things as they were half a century ago. The structure of the whole of English society has been broken down since then, into new shapes and oddities. But I believe that relics of the past

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survive, like pockets of snow during a general thaw ; and they can cause many an ideologist to lose his footing. [* * * * *]

A few minutes later Jack crept in.

"Silly !" he said, "that man was only drunk." I found the explanation satisfying, and fell asleep, safely home at last.

Hours later, in another lifetime, Jack came up to bed, and I woke with the pain gone, and only a numbness in my back and stomach, as though I were weighted inside with stones.

"Dad's seen the aquarium," he said, "and has promised us a bag of silver sand. He knows a man in the office who goes rowing on the river every Sunday, and will bring us some water-weeds."

He undressed by the dim light, under orders, no doubt, not to disturb me : but as always, his mind was active, and here was one of those rare occasions when he could no longer contain himself within his habit of taciturnity. At such times his slow but passionate enthusiasm, that refused to be defeated by the worst odds, drew me to him like a needle to a magnet. I sat up and watched him struggling into his biscuit-coloured flannel nightshirt, his head coming through like that of an eagle, the great beak gleaming in the gaslight under his silky hair. He might have been a hundred years old, rather than eleven, so serious, so responsible was he, planning ahead, nothing forgotten or neglected.

I listened, a silent lieutenant, proud and adoring. But I was also detached, and half ashamed of the fact that I was wondering how he could be so completely given up to these intense pre-occupations with things ; the aquarium, or the building of an engine, or the making of a sailing-boat. I thought him a magician : but I did not want to imitate him. I was not patient enough to use my hands as he used his ; there was always some further impulse disturbing me, wasting the hours of the day and peopling the night with a sense of purposes and frustrations.

"We can set it up in the bay window in the kitchen, and the light will shine on it from three sides," he whispered. He told me how he had read in the *Boys' Own Paper* of a device for keeping the water agitated with bubbles of air so that it should not grow stale and stifle the fish. He intended to 'save up' to buy glass tubing and miniature rubber hose, to make this apparatus. He was always 'saving up' for

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some long-term project, denying himself the normal boyhood day-to-day pleasures.

I listened entranced, but totally uninterested in the technical details. It was his intense concentration that held me, a willing, indeed eager little rabbit. This response to the spoken word became a habit of which I have never been able to rid myself. When I ask the way in a strange place, the person addressed no sooner begins to tell me than the timbre of his or her voice, the gesture accompanying it, the character sounding through it, hold me spell-bound, completely unresponsive of the needed information. I often see, in the eye of the stranger, a quizzical look, which suggests that I am suspected of being mentally deficient. It is probably a right suspicion, for a person who puts the cart before the horse cannot be quite sane.

"Were your hands *very* cold?" I asked, at the end of this discourse from the neighbouring pillow.

"What d'you mean?" he said, angry at my imbecility; and he ordered me to go to sleep.

* * * * *

The Tandems.

[*The development of my brother's musical genius led to much family consultation about buying a more satisfactory pianoforte, but the project was constantly delayed by my father's equally determined efforts to provide us with tandem bicycles so that he could be accompanied by his wife and sons on his exploration of the English roads. Much of the family drama centred around this contest. Ultimately the tandems were built and the moment for trying them out loomed ahead.*]

That time came on Boxing Day, two days after the arrival of the tandems.

The machines were the latest thing in the cycle-trade, particularly the smaller one specially built for two boys aged twelve and eight.

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The handle-bars were so designed that they could be adjusted through an infinity of positions, and the saddle-pins were elongated, for a like purpose.

It was impossible not to share Father's triumph and excitement. His pleasure might even be called delirium, except that the idea of fever within so perfect and healthy a body was inconceivable.

Although he was still sleepy on Christmas Day, after so many eighteen-hour stretches of work during the postal rush over several weeks, he got up early that morning, as soon as Jack and I had unpacked our stockings, and was out of doors before breakfast. While Mother cooked the Christmas dinner, he was busy with spanners and rags, tightening nuts and polishing spokes, summoning one or other of us in turn to see if our respective saddles were at the right height and pitch.

Mother had to summon him in several times, with some sharpness, so that he should be ready for the ceremony of Christmas Dinner ; but there he was, in his wooden arm-chair at the head of the kitchen table, skilfully sharpening the old carving-knife on the steel, the stag-horn handles of both clasped in his square fists. Before him lay the aitch-bone, a mountain of meat shaped like the rock of Gibraltar, still sizzling and spitting beads of fat, and oozing blood-gravy into the little well at one end of the willow-pattern dish.

" Ah ! " cried Father : and his teeth gleamed under his black moustache as he smiled at us, his small family seated with him at the table on that first Christmas Day of a new century, with all the roads of the world open before it. His grey eyes reflected those limitless vistas, and I could see his mind busy with the prospect of pleasures ahead to which he would introduce us now that we were equipped to accompany him.

Mother, flushed and tired after the hard morning's work in the hot kitchen, sat opposite him, and the steam from the joint and the mounds of potatoes, sprouts, and mashed swedes, clouded her spectacles ; or maybe they were dimmed by the heat from her face. She took them off and wiped them on the edge of the tablecloth, while Father carved the beef, filling our plates with thin slices, wielding his weapons with a flourish, while maintaining a gay discourse on his wife's genius as a cook, and how lucky we boys were to have such parents, who could

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feed us like this, and show us the glories of nature and the far cities of the earth.

Mother's brown eyes, without the disguise of her spectacles, looked at Father where he sat enthroned in his enthusiasm, like a god in a nimbus of light. I saw her worshipping him, and I wondered which of his family round that table admired him most, Mother, Jack or I.

What a meal it was ; the plates covered with a layer of roast beef, batter pudding and vegetables piled on that British base : the Christmas pudding that followed, black in its ripeness, and flaming with brandy: then the crackers, the almonds and raisins, and a glass of port for each of us.

When the feast was finished, and Jack and I had rolled like young Roman patricians from the table, Father over-rode Mother's protestations, and ordered her upstairs for a rest, while he and the boys would wash-up.

Two large black kettles of boiling water from the kitchen stove (a stove now lazily slumbering in its ashes after a hard morning) were consumed in this task, as well as the contents of auxiliary saucepans on the gas-stove in the scullery. Father, with Mother's apron round his best suit, stood at the sink, with the dirty plates and cutlery piled beside him. He talked and sang as he washed, jockeying Jack and me along when we fell behind with our wiping-up. The cat, also replete, sat on the mangle behind us, staring with an Egyptian inscrutability at this display of energy amid a cloud of steam, shot with half-lights from the surfaces of tumblers, plates, forks and spoons, polished by our towels.

Then the last saucepan was scrubbed with Monkey-brand soap, the bowl and sink flushed down with hot water and soda, and the job was done.

"Now, boys," cried Father. "We'll have a lesson in mounting!"

By this time my distended stomach was beginning to rebel, but I dared not say so. We went out to the yard, and the cold air struck through my super-heated skin, waking me from my lethargy, so that I realised, with a shock, the ordeal confronting me.

Father brought forward the smaller tandem, as proud of it as a cavalry officer of his horse. I stood shivering on the concrete, my swollen belly fluttering as though I had swallowed a live bird instead

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of a plate of beef. I was frightened as well as cold. This lesson was my initiation as a cyclist. I looked helplessly at Jack, who took the occasion calmly because he was already experienced, having possessed a small machine of his own for the past year or two.

"Come along," he said quietly. "You'd better try now. It'll make things easier when we have to go out on the road."

So I took my position beside the rear saddle of the tandem, while Jack held the front handle-bars. Father seized my right foot and my posterior, hoisted me into the saddle, explaining at the same time how I must push off on the right pedal, in time with Jack. After several repetitions of this exercise, we tried the process together, and to my terror I found myself in the saddle and the tandem rushing up the yard. Jack, not used to the length and weight behind him, wobbled and applied the brake. Whereupon I fell off and barked my shin on the rat-trap pedal. But again I dared not give in, and for the rest of the afternoon we went through the movements of mounting and dismounting, until by tea-time the ritual was mastered, and I felt some confidence, though by now Jack was bored and grumpy. Father, however, was jubilant. He patted us on our strained and aching backs, and promised us a real ride next day, and a lesson in correct pedalling, with the ankle dropped and heel at the correct angle, to get the most power in every push.

Darkness saved us from further drill. Silent, exhausted, we crept into the house, leaving Father to bed the tandem down in its stable, and to follow us indoors, as cheerful as ever, where he greeted Mother with a kiss and drank half a dozen cups of tea, while describing the route which we were to follow next day on our first family ride.

The pleasures of Christmas evening were shadowed by that vigorous prospect. I call them pleasures ; but every child must know the anticlimax that follows the impossible excitements of the earlier stages of Christmas Day : the day that began in the small hours of darkness, with toes groping under the blankets, trying to feel the laden stockings at the bed-end. Then, with wakefulness increasing at each rustle of wrapping paper, there followed the decision that we could start, whereupon Jack scrambled out of bed, slowly struck a match, and lingeringly lighted the gas, commanding me not to be so impatient. So came the moment to unpack the stockings, to show each other,

item by item, the carefully chosen gifts, until we came to the formal apple and orange at the bottom.

After that, the removal of ourselves with our swollen and confused riches, to our parents' bed, where we sat up, demonstrating our treasures, while the elders dozed, half-sincere in their occasional displays of interest.

Throughout the morning, these gifts and the larger ones given us at breakfast, would keep us in a state of delirious ecstasy, an exultation that could only result in a corresponding fall.

It came always after tea, and it usually lasted right through Boxing Day, by which time the more fragile of the treasures would be broken, and those left whole would have lost their savour.

That Christmas evening our gloom was deepened by foreboding, as Father sat tuning his fiddle, and giving us our marching orders, or rather pedalling orders, for the morrow. He proposed to take us for our first family excursion, to Virginia Water, and back. That was his idea of a gentle ride, without strain for Mother, and bearing in mind that this would be my introduction, as a cyclist, to the 'rolling English road.' Only Father knew the mileage, and the weight of the tandems.

"Are you sure it's all right?" asked Mother.

He pooh-poohed the misgiving, and reminded her that he and Jack would be at the head of the tandems, bearing the brunt. Boxing Day dawned bleakly, with thick fog and frost. Mother refused to set off, as had been proposed, after breakfast. Father was annoyed, and took himself into the back-room, where he played his flute in solitude until dinner-time.

We all sat in silence round the table, consuming cold beef, bubble-and-squeak, and cold Christmas pudding. "Tom!" said Mother, suddenly, at the end of the meal. Both Jack and I detected the note of warning in her voice, and we looked at each other apprehensively. It made us shy, and miserable, to see Father rolled over and bounced in the flood, as though he were no older than ourselves, though we knew that in the end, as the clouds rolled away, Mother would contrive to restore his dignity, and set him up again as the Head of the House, who could do no wrong, and whose word was law.

But this time the heavens were on Father's side, for the fog broke,

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and a gleam of sunlight, like a dusty yellow handkerchief, flicked across the bay window of the kitchen, and almost brought the aquarium and its inmates to life.

It also flicked the sulkiness and disappointment out of Father's grey eyes. He looked up, squinted at the sky, and said :

"You were quite right, my girl. We've done better to wait. But it'll have to be a short ride round the houses today. After all, there's a lifetime before us."

Mother could not deny him a second time, and we got ourselves ready for a local expedition. Father wore a short covert coat of fawn, a cap, knickerbockers, stockings and spats. Mother veiled her straw hat, as though she were a bee-keeper, fastened the edges of her skirt, with clips and yards of elastic, to the insteps of her shoes, and carried a little fox fur tippet round her neck. Jack and I both wore buckled knickerbockers, black stockings, marine jerseys, and cloth caps. I was also wound into a long scarf made of squares of red and black knitting (like the quilt on our bed), and I wore a pair of woollen gloves.

The front door was locked, the cat put out, and we all emerged into the back yard.

"Now then," said Father. "We're off, my dears ! I'll lead the way, Jack ; and we'll make for the park, ride round once or twice, then come out by the Queen's Road and beat the boundaries of the parish. There will be no traffic about on Boxing afternoon."

He was right, as he always was, in outdoor affairs. The streets of Battersea, after the revels of Christmas Day, and the morning of fog, were deserted. We had no need for self-consciousness as we wheeled the long tandems round to the street, accompanied by the cat, who sat on the coping, mewling with dismay at being turned out of her arm-chair on a cold and frosty afternoon.

Mother and Father mounted, and left the mooring of the curb-stone. "Come on," said Jack, "or we shall lose sight of them."

I shivered, gulped, and obeyed. Jack was already in his saddle, grasping the handle-bars and balancing the machine beside the curb, with the offside pedal raised, and his foot on it ready for the push-off.

I put my foot over the low centre bar, and took my seat.

"Now push !" cried Jack.

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We were afloat. We glided on, and the pedals carried my feet round with them. Gradually feeling the regularity of this movement, I began to take my share in keeping it going, leaning forward convulsively and pushing on the downstroke. But I forgot the other pedal rising on an unaccented syllable, and the foot on it was lost, was wagging in mid-air, and the ankle was angrily bitten by the rat-trap pedal.

The pain was sharp and unexpected. Tears streamed down my face, and the cold air chilled them to pellets of steel. But Jack was desperate, and wholly concerned to keep the machine on an even keel. He was fighting against the weight and length of the monster, and the useless lump of mortality seated behind him.

I could do nothing but hang on, my hands convulsive on the brown felt grips. Jack urged me to push, for he could not propel the tandem alone. I did my best, and slowly the numbed foot came to life again, though by now my fingers were frozen to the bars.

We rounded the corner safely at the top of the street, and this gave us confidence. After all, the tandem was a handsome specimen, and unique. Our parents were sailing on ahead, and I heard Father call aloud,

"Come along, boys, keep close."

His voice floated merrily over the ghostly parish, and I saw a window curtain drawn aside and a face peering out at us.

On we pedalled, and by the time we reached the Park Gates near the Prince of Wales's Mansions, I had caught the knack of free-wheeling at the same time as Jack, though this meant a slight lag in my rhythm, the difference between pushing with him, and being on the alert for pushing with him. This gave him the burden, though neither of us knew that I was not taking my share.

I could see little ahead; only the faded blue of Jack's jersey, and the nape of his neck. But to right and left I had a prospect of Battersea that commanded my attention by its stillness. I have never forgotten that quiet scene, so negatively emphasised. Even the fashionable bicycle track round the park was empty. We circled it twice, Father and Mother slowing down and riding abreast of us, so that Father could give us a taste of his vitality as an open-air guide. Nothing quelled his high spirits. I watched his shapely calves working as

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steadily as the pistons of a locomotive, his ankles and heels dropping on the turn, regular, exact. The pressure needed no exertion, and he still had all his breath to feed that flood of conversation, buoyed upon outbursts of song, usually a stave or two from his favourite ballad :

“ Oh merry goes the day
When the heart is young.”

His heart was congenitally young, and appeared to be totally unaffected by the hardship and humiliations of his early life. Like Hardy's ‘Darkling Thrush,’ he poured abroad his triple repeated ecstasies :

“ When Frost was spectre-gray,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.”

These words from Hardy's poem, written that week, on the 31st of December, aptly describe the afternoon of Boxing Day, and the boskage of Battersea Park, where the morning's fog still lingered under the bare trees, though their higher branches ‘scored the sky’ with some faint suggestion of colour and form, brown against pink, but all of it dusted with the gathering consolidation of frost.

That frost deadened my feet, which moved round, each in its cold circle, like corpses in a whirlpool. Even Father's animal warmth could not thaw them, though he rode beside us, and from time to time put an encouraging hand on my back, a giant's gesture that caused our tandem to leap forward as though the road were suddenly declined beneath it.

Battersea is never a sun-drenched district. It lies in what used to be marsh and mudflats, a stretch of land succumbed to the lazy embrace of a wide curve of the Thames. In primeval times, the mists must have lingered there winter and summer. In the Victorian Age of smoke and iron, they lingered there still, but deepened with an overhead obscurity never wholly dispelled. That may be why, in those days, few birds inhabited there ; only a desolate colony of sparrows, their feathers monotoned and as drab as their feeble twitterings.

The inhabitants of Battersea tried, instinctively, to brighten their lives by a copious use of lime and whitewash. Human resistance to environment is always marked in some way, and we find that the

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cleanest and most arduous housewives inhabit the dark industrial towns. I think of the white lace curtains, the flashing window-panes, the vividly reddled or whitened doorsteps, of the dwellings in Leeds, or Manchester. So too in Battersea, where now the natural canopy of river mists was augmented and riveted with the heavy underside of factory smoke, the dreary streets were diversified with a thousand eccentricities of domestic pride ; a front-path paved with bottle-ends or even the metal caps from bottles ; a figure-head rescued from the ship-breaker's yard ; an old mast erected on a deck of concrete before the house ; and hung before his gate by one neighbour, a lifebelt kept bright with white paint.

This was the little world round which we rode that day, during its suspension from the welter and moil of normal life.

Leaving the Park, by an eastern gate, we followed the parental tandem over Chelsea Bridge. Father had evidently changed his mind. I was to discover that once on the road, he threw all consecutive plans to the winds. Often, on a tour, he would start off in the morning by wetting his finger, holding it up to feel which way the wind blew, and choosing our course by deciding to run before the wind, 'to help the boys along,' but also, I suspected, to enjoy a greater sense of freedom and to spread the wings of his panic heart in a justified irresponsibility.

Over the bridge, we turned westward along the Chelsea Embankment. Here we passed one or two broughams carrying rich children to the parties of other rich children ; fabulous creatures wholly outside our ken. The sooty gardens in front of Cheyne Row lay dead. How sombre, how ominous was Victorian London in winter, especially to a child susceptible to colour and clean line, and to whom cold and damp were specially abhorrent because they increased the periodical bouts of pain in his stomach.

Father pointed out the place where he had thrown the pickled onions at Thomas Carlyle, but the story meant little to me, for the name was unknown, and I was beginning to flag. Our tandem was built not of light alloys, but of the steel that was the chief foundation of the British Empire, permitting it to pile superstructure upon superstructure of wealth. I felt as though I were propelling the whole of the Steel Industry at each rise of the pedals. But Jack did not think

Over the Bridge

so. He grumbled at me for being a mere passenger, and he was probably right, for he had to lean over his handle-bars, and groan as he pushed.

"Drop your ankle! Drop your ankle," cried Father, disapproving of this uncontrolled exertion. Jack only muttered to himself, and I could see, from the pose of the back of his head, that he too was at the point of exhaustion. I began to feel miserable, and I looked at Mother, but she was still veiled, and she sat behind Father like Patience upon the monument, though I was certain she was not smiling.

We passed the end of Tite Street, and though by this time I was too enfeebled to give attention to any matter, I recalled how Jack and I had crept timidly on to the Embankment, bearing the precious aquarium.

Father now proposed that we should plunge past the house where the painter J. M. W. Turner once lived in squalor, into the district so aptly named the World's End, and that we should continue westward along King's Road, Chelsea, to Walham Green, ultimately to cross the river by Wandsworth Bridge, and so home by the York Road past the malodorous candle factory.

But the veiled figure of Patience riding behind Father suddenly came to life, and an angry life. She insisted on dismounting. Accordingly we drew into the side, by the river-pavement. Jack's strength, however, was not enough to support the tandem while I jumped off. Nor was I capable of jumping, my inadequate body being by now rigid with cold. We both collapsed, and lay on the pavement with the tandem on top of us. The situation was not graceful, and it offended Jack's over-mature dignity. After we had struggled up, unhurt, he stood white with anger, and not daring to vent it on Father, he picked upon me as the scapegoat. I was past caring. I stood in a coma of general discomfort, every part of my anatomy aching, except those parts too numbed by cold even to ache.

There followed, upon the pavement of Chelsea Embankment, still happily deserted, one of those scenes when Mother broke through her usual policy of government by seeming acquiescence, and staged an open revolt.

Without a word, she brushed us both down, leaving Father to pick up the shining tandem and rest it against the trunk of a plane tree.

Richard Church

Then, snatching off my gloves, and feeling my hands, then Jack's, in search of evidence, she opened her attack. She cursed the tandems, their weight, their length, their manoeuvrability. She referred to the disabilities of the female body, and particularly of mothers of children, she pointed out the singular delicacy of her own children and enumerated several reasons for it, all connected with Father's heredity, personal stupidity and callousness. She called upon God to witness the universal unfairness between the sexes, with woman as the eternal victim and slave.

Jack, during this oration, retreated to the balustrade, and looked at the ebbing tide, and the sea-gulls lamenting over the mudbanks of Chelsea Reach.

Still Mother had not finished. She was flushed, as I could see because she had unfastened her veil. The smoky sunset clouded the lenses of her spectacles, otherwise the fire of her eyes would have annihilated poor Father, who stood quietly waiting, as though being photographed beside the new machine.

Mother's vehemence terrified me by its extravagant range. I wanted to implore her to stop, to leave the rest unsaid, so that the whole universe of nature and man should not be made to depend upon my Father's innocent impulses, his premature opening of the summer campaign for the conquest of the English roads.

At last Mother's breath gave out. She stopped, and drew me to her as though we were now to face the spears of a hostile tribe, or the rifles of a firing party.

"That's all right, old girl," said Father. "We'll take a short cut home over Battersea Bridge."

The Country Gentleman

BY ETIENNE AMYOT

I DON'T suppose I had seen Mortimer Mason for something like twenty-five years when I ran into him again just outside Florian's. He stood stock still in front of me and re-introduced himself. "Mortimer Mason," he said, stiffly holding out his hand, and making me think of that unbending way the Teutons have when they square their shoulders, draw in their heels, and belligerently tell you who they are.

Certainly, had he not told me who he was, I should never have recognised him. For the slim, fastidiously-dressed young man with the face of an angel and the brow of a poet that I had known long years ago had given way to an unkempt, flabby figure, with receding hair, a pendulous lip, and a large stomach.

"Upon my word," he exclaimed, "I don't believe you even recognised me!"

"It was merely," I faltered, "that you were the last person I expected to run into here in Venice."

He drew himself up again.

"Well, you wouldn't have run into me anywhere else!"

"You mean," I said, "you're *living* here?"

"Like the Doges of old, dear boy, I, too, have cast my ring into the Adriatic."

That reply told me beyond a doubt it was certainly Mortimer Mason who was standing in front of me, and none other, and in a flash I saw him again as I had last seen him, in my aunt's house, holding forth at one of her literary gatherings.

"Are you in Venice for long?" he asked.

"Only to-night," I answered. "I'm passing through, on my way to Trieste."

"Then I assume you are free this evening?"

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This put me in something of a quandary, for I had looked forward to having the evening to myself. I had hoped to roam about the city as the fancy took me ; to wander on foot along the darkened alleyways, and over a hundred arching bridges ; then at last to take myself to that little restaurant down by the water's edge, just beyond the *Salute*, where the *gondolieri* come to feast off *gnocchi* and those delicious soft-shelled crabs, and fill the place with their song till the small hours.

"Perhaps you will dine with me?" he went on.

There was such an undercurrent of desire in his voice, such a sort of wistful pressure, that I hadn't the heart to refuse him.

"I'd like nothing more," I said.

My acceptance of his invitation seemed immediately to give him confidence. His air of diffidence and insecurity fell from him, and in its place I could detect again that old manner of wanting to take me under his protective wing.

"I'll come and pick you up," he said. "I know just the place to take you to. Not one of these dressed-up places they provide for the tourist—but the *real thing*!"

I could feel him warming more and more to me.

"After dinner we'll make a little tour. There's a lot you don't know, and a lot I can show you."

He seemed positively eager to reveal himself in the rôle of cicerone. But if that was the rôle he wished to play it wasn't for me, I thought, to spoil his pleasure. I decided to do what I had done twenty-five years ago. For an hour or two I would go back to our old relationship and tune my reaction to the exact key he wanted.

I told him where I was staying. He said he would pick me up at eight.

Then I watched that altered, unbelievable figure roll away across the Piazza and lose itself in the milling crowds in front of San Marco.

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I was very young when I first met Mortimer. I suppose I was fifteen at the time. I met him at my aunt's house in Tite Street.

My aunt Leonie had a singular talent for catching celebrities. She was one of the great lion-hunters of her day. And amongst the

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big-game that came to her stand-up luncheons and afterwards strolled through her drawing-room none was more striking nor more calculated to appeal to a young, impressionable mind than was Mortimer Mason.

In those days my imagination, with the tenacity of a limpet, was fastened upon the world of art. I was almost incurably romantic. Poets, painters, and musicians seemed to form a calendar of their own, just one rung below that of the Saints. And Mortimer Mason, at that first meeting, made an impression on me that I can remember to this day. It would be accurate to say he swept me off my feet.

My aunt was delighted by the interest he showed in me, and I have always believed the hundred pounds she eventually bequeathed me was put into her Will at that time. For her own part she was passionately drawn to him ; to those large lustrous eyes which were the dominant feature in his expressive face ; to that elegant figure with its canary waistcoat, and its cream silk stock ; to those languid, fluttering gestures ; and to the epigrams and aphorisms which seemed to fall as lightly from his lips as the dew from off a briar-rose.

I was drawn to him for a different reason ! : because he was so exactly what my young mind had conceived a poet to be.

There was no reason on earth why he should have shown the slightest interest in me. Yet all that summer holiday, when I lived in Tite Street, he took me under his protective wing. He marched me off to exhibitions ; he made me hear Melba and Kreisler ; he gave me a taste for bric-à-brac, letting me help him comb the junk-shops of London from one end to the other ; he bought me books.

He opened up a vista of life I would never otherwise have known. He threw knowledge in my path in the lightest, most inconsequent way as though, like the grass beneath our feet, it was something for everyone to stumble upon. With me he never made anything of a show of his learning. Yet, beneath the studied insouciance of his manner there was, I suspected, an unflagging vitality.

Looking back now on the companionship he afforded me at that time I am tempted to think he took to me the way he did because I was such a perfect audience. It may possibly have flattered him to have someone sit so open-mouthed before him, and to have such virgin soil upon which to drop his little sharp seeds of erudition.

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For my own part I could find no flaw in him. He was all I had ever imagined—and more. He showed me the beauty my young heart craved for, and diverted me from that realism which life was only to reveal at a much later date.

But, even if he had shown no great interest in me, I should have been drawn to him just the same. For quite apart from the charm of his own personality there was also his own life-story. And that life-story I believed to be the history of every creative artist.

To begin with, no one knew who were his relations, or from where he hailed. Whenever the question of 'family' arose—as it sometimes did—he would give one of those languid gestures and say that Darwin alone knew the origin of *his* species! Rumour had it he had come from somewhere abroad—Canada, or Australia—and that he had landed in England without a penny-piece in his pocket. For a year, rumour went on, he had stood behind a glove counter in Bradford, and had only graduated from that position to become clerk in a firm of ship's chandlers on the Clyde. He had known what it was to starve, and to live in a miserable garret. Every spare minute of his time he had devoted to writing. At nineteen he had thrown off a poetic epic, and posted it to Eddie Rumble—the doyen of literary critics—who had hailed him as the genius of the age. He had then burnt his boats (and his epic, because he was dissatisfied with it) and migrated to London, done hack work in Fleet Street, and, without committing so much as a single line of his verse to print, become an immense social success. At one of Eddie Rumble's breakfasts he had met and been taken up by a dowager with a *salon* in Chesterfield Street.

After that, he had been taken up by everyone.

When I first met him at my aunt Leonie's, he was twenty-seven. He still had published nothing. But, on occasion, when pressed, he would give utterance to some small fragment, some tenuous lyric or sonnet, which had come to him 'that morning.'

I don't suppose any man ever had a greater reputation founded on less concrete achievement. And yet, there was some sort of magic in his personality, some gift he had of being able to cast a spell over others, that made one fervently believe in him.

When asked when he was going to publish his work he invariably

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replied that his *collected* works would appear in due course. He stated, and with what seemed complete sincerity, that he was in no way susceptible to the world's praise. He could no more turn things out to order than he could compose for financial gain. He wrote merely to please himself.

These sentiments, curiously enough, added to his reputation. In a world presumably filled to the brim with literary charlatans his friends regarded him as someone who could be relied on to pursue art for art's sake. Never for one moment did anyone suggest that he might conceivably be a fake, and that all his talk about rhyme and metre was so much window-dressing. His conversation alone would have given the lie to that. Yet the months and the years went by, and still no word of his found its way into print. But so dazzling was the aura of genius which his friends had bestowed on him that, in some quarters, it was already a foregone conclusion that when his work did at long last appear it would immediately take its place beside the finest poetry in the language.

After that one summer, when I had seen so much of him, I did not see him again. But some years later I read in a newspaper that he was married. He had married a Miss Singleton who, as I was afterwards told, was extremely well off and owned a large property in the north. After his marriage he deserted London. One never saw him. And when one day I asked my aunt Leonie what had become of him she merely sighed and said that so far as she knew he was happily married, bred dogs, and had given up his literary pursuits for the life of a country gentleman.

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He picked me up punctually at eight, and I saw at once that he had gone to great pains over his appearance. He had decked himself up into a caricature of the past.

He had on a thin tussore suit, pinched at the shoulders and painfully drawn across his stomach. With it he wore one of his old-fashioned canary-coloured cloth waistcoats. As of old, carefully tied under his chin, was the familiar cream silk stock. He had exchanged his boots for a pair of patent-leather pumps, and the gloves he held in his hand were of white kid. I found the whole of that appearance

almost unbearably pathetic. His air of languor, and those old fluttering gestures, merely served to accentuate that first impression.

I took him into the room off the Bar, reserved for the hotel guests, and thought if I could perhaps make him a little drunk it might ease the strain of the evening before us. He sat down in a large plush arm-chair, stretched his legs in front of him, and gave an unmistakable sigh of contentment. It was then I realised that it was probably some considerable time since he had last been so comfortably seated. He glanced round at the ornate furnishings of the place, and gave a little nod of approval at the heavy velvet curtains and the thick pile carpet.

I ordered two double dry-Martinis.

"How long is it now, dear boy?" he asked.

"Twenty-five years," I said.

"As long as that?"

"Yes. As long as that."

He looked at me over his glass; a glance that was surprisingly ingenuous.

"Would you say I had greatly altered?"

I felt myself go hot under the collar.

"No more than the rest of us," I said.

"Of course," he went on, "I know I've put on a little weight. I'll have to do something about that one of these days. But, I must confess, I don't feel any older. After all, it's a man's mind that matters. It's *there* that age trips one up. And I've certainly never felt more alert, more consciously aware, or more *prepared*."

Prepared, I wondered, for what?

"I suppose the truth is that Time doesn't hit all of us the same way. Some of us are able, as it were, to resist being taken by the scruff and hustled down the years. Speaking entirely for myself, dear boy, there are long periods when I seem to feel myself standing *outside* Time; when I know it simply hasn't the power to get at me."

He surveyed me for a moment with that same benign, ingenuous glance.

"That little flickering light which is *us* can, if we encourage it to do so, burn on for years—serene, defiant, constant. And no amount of days or hours can alter its flame."

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So that, I thought, was how Time had got at him ! By insidiously, triumphantly making him see white where all the world saw black !

On a sudden I wondered what he was doing with himself, and why, apart from that delusion of days and hours, he had chosen of all places to exile himself in Venice. I thought of him breeding his dogs and being the country gentleman and wondered when that phase, like that earlier poetic phase, had come to an end. It was clear he was in low water. One glance at his appearance answered penury.

I imagined his wife had died ; that her large property, like so many others in England, had been whittled away, or perhaps been left to another ; and that now, alone, without her support, he was forced to fend for himself. Perhaps he had chosen Venice in order to put as great a distance as he could between what he had once been, and what he had now come to.

Then I remembered the eagerness with which that afternoon, when we had run again into one another, he had cast himself for the rôle of cicerone ; how he had told me there was much I didn't know of the city and how, after dinner, he would take me for a tour of it and make good the gaps in my knowledge. The way, too, he had told me he would take me to dine where I should find the ' real thing ' had had more than a touch of the professional about it.

Suddenly my instinct leapt ahead of that memory, and I now saw him, again in the Piazza, at the height of the Season, offering his services to others ; seeking out some German or American tourist, and taking *them* for a round trip of the city in order to improve the gaps in *their* education ; throwing out the sort of remark which could only come from him, like that one about ' casting his ring into the Adriatic ' ; and working up some theory of his own as to how the city got its name—telling the astonished citizens of Dortmund or Wisconsin that Venice was merely a corruption of Venus, and that the fabulous city had been given its birth by the goddess of the sea herself !

As clearly as though I were there, a witness of the scene, I could now see him, leading the way past the Palace of the Doges, or across the Rialto, drawing the attention of those who followed to fresh vistas and to greater wonders. And, at the end of it all, I could see,

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too, the little pile of dirty lire notes, so hardly earned, drop from his hand into his shabby pocket.

After twenty-five years to come upon him again, fallen to this !

A part of the season's *fantoccini*—as he himself would have expressed it, had it happened to another ! The merest puppet, pulled this way and that by the strings of circumstance ! Then I recollected again how, in my aunt's house in Tite Street, he had moved with that incomparable air of ease and brilliance ; how he had captivated his listeners ; and how secure he had seemed in his reputation of poet, scholar, and literary arbiter !

"Do you still remember that summer, dear boy?" he suddenly asked.

"I shall never forget it," I said. "It was one of the landmarks of my young life."

"How good of you, dear boy. How good of you to say that."

Idly he tapped with his finger upon his empty glass.

"A most excellent drink," he said.

I called the *camarieri* and ordered another.

"And your dear aunt?" he asked.

"I'm afraid Time got the better of her," I said.

"Nothing could get the better of her !" he exclaimed. "She was a law unto herself. But there're none left like that nowadays." I wondered whether that was a signal to dip more freely into the past, but he abruptly stood up, and finished his drink. "I think," he said, "we should go and dine."

* * * * *

I had expected one of those dimly-lit taverns off some narrow court ; one of those cheap eating-houses that take in all the putrid stench of a stagnant backwater. But he brought me instead to the most delightful *trattoria*. As he had promised, it wasn't the sort of place likely to be patronised by the ordinary tourist. We sat outside, beside a trellis covered with flowers. I noticed he was given a very friendly welcome by the waiters.

I told him as I was in Venice only the one night that I hoped he would be my guest, and let it be my evening. But he waived my suggestion aside. It was only in England he said that one haggled over the problems of payment. We didn't discuss the subject further,

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but I was determined whatever payment there was to be done should not be done by him.

He chose an excellent dinner, and as we drank our Orvieto his manner became more and more expansive.

"Where are you now living?" he asked.

"In London," I said.

"Do you often get out of it, into the country?"

"Not very often."

He looked steadily for a moment at me.

"Once you've accustomed yourself to the English countryside, you can never again live with any happiness in a large English city." He was silent for a while.

"Before the War," he went on, "when I married, we went to live up in Herefordshire. Ah, you cannot conceive what a paradise that was! We lived in an old black and white house, set on a hill, in the midst of a wide, rolling park. We looked out over the hills to the Black Mountains. We had the Welsh air without being forced to live amongst the Welsh! We had a feeling of utter seclusion, of having cut ourselves off from the world. Yet the world, like some hanging garden, lay there right at our door. Perhaps you had heard, perhaps your aunt had told you, I'd gone to settle up there?"

"Yes. I knew."

I tried to sound as disinterested as I could. I didn't wish him to think I wanted to pry into the past.

"*Ah, to be in England!*" he exclaimed. "That cry of Browning's came from the heart. Often now, when I pass the Rezzonico, I think of him, sitting here in Venice, exiled from all that must so constantly, so poignantly have pulled at him. For there's nothing on earth to compare with England at that time of the year, when the woods are alight with the beauty of Spring, and each single hedgerow foams with the blackthorn. And then, most miraculous of all, when the air like glass shimmers and sparkles over that arras of blue—that fleeting span of the bluebell—takes on its reflection, then becomes a haze in which colour and scent are equally dissolved!"

He looked up again at me.

"I've been here," he said, "for nearly three years. And I cannot tell you how I miss it all."

He began to play with a piece of bread, his fingers digging into it and rolling it into a little ball.

"One should never let what one loves intrude itself on what one has to do. And yet, how is one to escape from what one loves? One can turn the mind in on itself. But when, for years, the vision has been fastened—and happily fastened—on those delights which the earth in all its fairness has to offer, how then can one avert one's gaze and shut off from the soul all that has nourished it? Here in Venice I am faced day after day by beauty of another kind. But all I see is made by man—these towers, canals, palaces, and campaniles. And what is made by man is after all the poorest sort of imitation. I would willingly exchange all you see here for a meadow in Herefordshire—a meadow covered with cowslips and buttercups. Palladio, Titian, the jewels of San Marco—you may have them all for any hedgerow that grows in England."

He pushed the little ball of dough he had made away from him.

"It was, of course, my wife's property. It had been in her family for generations. When we married she longed to make it over to me. But that couldn't be, for it was entailed, and there was small likelihood of our having a child of our own. But she did all she could to make me feel it was as much mine as hers. And by that partnership—that sense of something equally shared—which she insisted on from the very beginning, I grew to love it as well as she did. You never met her, did you? My Caroline? Ah, you'd have lain at her feet. For no woman was ever blessed with more goodness, or more intuition. She knew, without my having to tell her, just how much my own imagination had had to supply what life had chosen to deny me. But, as man cannot live by bread alone, so, too, can he not continually be fed by only the imagination. I needed an anchor—something to take me away from that imagining. And she supplied it, and in a measure I can never repay."

I longed to ask when she had died and he been cast adrift, but couldn't somehow bring myself to frame so naked a query.

"It is a curious thing," he went on, "how often the creative artist has had to desert England. One thinks of Shelley and Keats and Delius, and a host of others. When you and I first met I often toyed with the idea of leaving England; for amongst the English one is

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apt to get a reputation too early for doing too little, and one is driven to get away in order, quite simply, to find oneself. But I never had the courage to go."

"Why not?" I asked, interrupting him for the first time.

"For a perfectly simple reason, dear boy. I didn't think my talent was worth the effort. I had no faith in it. I was perfectly aware that not a single word I wrote in those days was a tenth so good, so effective, so rewarding as the *impression* I was able to make."

He gave a dry little chuckle.

"Can you wonder then that what was expected of me hung over me like a sword? Why, at nights, when I used to lie in my bed and contemplate the situation I'd got myself into, I'd sweat from top to toe. I'd done what no man should ever do. I'd gone and offered my wares before I had any wares to sell. A most damnable position, I assure you! And yet, don't entirely misjudge me. I *did* know there was something I could make of myself once I'd divorced myself from that facile front. But how to divorce myself from it? Then Caroline came into my life, and with marriage I found the most incredible relief—really there is no other word for it. At last I had an excuse for leading quite another sort of life, and not being forced to produce those wares I'd led everyone into believing were there for the having. The truth, dear boy, was because I spoke with some facility, your aunt and all her circle expected me to write even better. But somehow that flow of speech, that ease with which I could strike a note—and often the right note—struck back at me. For months on end I'd sit at my table, a blank page in front of me. Words which fell with such facility from my lips were, for some reason, withheld from my pen. Coleridge's *Mariner*, adrift at sea, with water all around yet parched for lack of drink, was in no worse plight than I. But then, as I've told you, Caroline came into my life, and I went with her up to Herefordshire, and the whole great weight on my conscience was lifted from me." He leant back, and the waiter took away his plate and brought the next course.

"I had hit on a new profession. The profession of the country gentleman. At your aunt Leonie's, you might recollect, I could argue at length and with some persuasion about the merit of sprung-verse, or even an heroic couplet. Now, in my own stable-yard, I

discovered I could argue with the same felicity of phrase about dung, or phosphates, or the making of compost! And then, in this new profession, I discovered something else, something of inestimable value—the blessed relief of never knowing an idle moment. It was no longer necessary to sit about, distraught and restless, waiting for inspiration. Now I had to be up and doing. Ah, it's a wonderful drug, that endless activity one finds in the country! Sometimes we would rise before the dawn, and be out in the fields with the harvesters, and across the hills we would see 'right against the eastern gate the great sun begin his state.' Do you still read your Milton, dear boy? They tell me he is out of fashion. But for me he remains the grandest, the noblest of them all."

"You enjoyed then the life of a country gentleman?" I said.

"Thoroughly," he answered, giving again that dry little chuckle.

"It was, as you might say, exactly what the doctor ordered."

He paused, then looked up at me with a faint amusement.

"It was that old trick I'd learnt as a boy. That almost foolproof technique of imagining things to be what they weren't. Why, look at me, dear boy. Can you see me, with any conviction, sitting upon the local Bench? Can you see me comfortably riding to Hounds?"

Quite frankly I didn't know what to make of that answer. It seemed somehow, quixotically, to evade the issue.

We had our coffee in silence, and he gazed thoughtfully down at his cup. I motioned discreetly for the bill, hoping my gesture would escape his notice. But when the waiter brought it he took it from him.

"This is my little *festa*," he said. "And it goes down to me." He scribbled his name and the date across it, then handed it back with a generous tip to the waiter.

"And now," he went on, rising, and touching my arm, "I'm going to show you one or two things you haven't seen before." He put his face near to mine, and there was an odd gleam in his eyes.

"You will discover, dear boy, what an evening in this city is like when you put yourself in the hands of the *best guide* in the whole of Venice!"

* * * * *

It was remarkable how right my instinct had been, and how I had

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guessed what he was doing. I couldn't but flatter myself on my own perception. As to his boast that he was the 'best guide in the whole of Venice' he spoke no less than the truth. No professional cicerone could have known more than he did. He took me, on foot and by water, from one end of the city to the other, and in the short space of three hours showed me sights and scenes I should certainly never otherwise have known.

His knowledge of the city was exhaustive. But, as in the old days, when he had first taken me under his wing and showed me a whole new world, he didn't throw that knowledge at me. He had the rare gift for making each new discovery seem as though I, and not he, were the discoverer. There wasn't a palazzo, a church, a flight of steps, nor a monument about which he hadn't something to tell me of abiding interest; nor was there a single question I could put to him about the Republic itself that he couldn't immediately, and accurately, answer.

Earlier that evening he had spoken of Time and said how there were long periods when he could stand outside it, when Time hadn't the power to touch him. I now began to understand a little of what he meant. For, during this tour of the city, he had somehow been able to roll back Time, and had put me back to our old relationship. Once again I was the boy of fifteen being shown a new world by the favourite of my aunt Leonie's 'celebrities.'

Yet, as the evening drew to a close, and we walked together, or sat side by side in some quietly drifting gondola, Time advanced again, and I had a sense of a widening gulf between us. Something in my companion began to defeat me. I had a feeling of frustration, of not being able at all to make him out.

Why, I asked myself again, had he come to Venice? Why had he taken up this of all professions open to him? Why, loving England the way he did, had he forced himself to live so far from it? What, in fact, had really happened to him to cast him adrift this side of the Adriatic? From all he had hinted at it was clear his wife—that intuitive and philanthropic lady at whose feet presumably I should have cast myself—was no more. And with her passing had passed also that property with its hedgerows and meadows which he had so passionately, so poetically grown to love. Entailed estates have a

way of taking their income along with them to their next owner. And it was obvious he had been left financially as high and as dry as the day before he married. But, remembering him again as I had last known him, I couldn't abide the thought of his now having to eke out a livelihood hawking tourists around Venice, confined probably to some shabby little room, and unable even to buy himself a decent suit. That outgrown tussore jacket with its bulging seams, and those other worn accoutrements of the past, brought home more painfully than anything else just how low he had fallen. With savage resentment I thought of a Fate which could cripple and humiliate, which could lower and cast down what it had once raised up.

As we came back across the Piazza to my hotel, I suddenly heard myself blurt out: "When did your wife die?"

His mouth fell open, and he looked at me with the blankest astonishment.

"Die?" he exclaimed. "Who has told you Caroline is dead?"

"But——" I faltered, stopping short in my tracks and looking with the utmost confusion up at him, "but—I thought—I understood you to say——"

"Why," he went on, "she's on her way over. I expect to see her in Venice the day after to-morrow. And it was on the tip of my tongue to ask whether you wouldn't remain another night before going on to Trieste, so that you could meet her!"

* * * * *

I couldn't stay another night. I had a business meeting in Trieste, and I had to leave Venice the next morning. But instead of going to my hotel I walked with him to his own lodging. He had suggested I should take a nightcap with him.

He lived in the Palazzo Visconti, one of the most beautiful buildings in the whole of Venice. He had rented the two top floors. He lived with a grandeur and state equal to that of any Renaissance prince. The door was opened to us by a footman in splendid livery.

He led me through a large apartment hung with the finest tapestries and candelabra into a small study which looked down on to the Grand Canal. The room was lined with books. I glanced at some of

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the authors : Dante, Laura, Ovid, Homer, Goethe, and Shakespeare. On the polished refectory table which served as his desk was a little alabaster bust of his favourite Milton. In front of that bust was a single sheet of blank paper. At the side was a neat array of pens, and newly-sharpened pencils.

He waved me into a chair.

"My work-room," he said. "It is here that I intend to exercise the talent God has given me."

He paused for a moment, then glanced with some amusement at those incredible clothes he was wearing.

"As you will observe, dear boy, I have gone back to the dress of my student days."

Mademoiselle Firmin

BY ROBIN FEDDEN

THOUGH there were storms with rain-clouds sagging over the river, and raw winds that whipped the blossom from the cherry trees, the landscape of Chantemesle, as it settles in time, is veiled by a faint June haze and the afternoon is windless. A similar tranquillity seemed, when I was a child, to mark the life of the valley. The villagers were not real and suffering people. Their names were associated with a craft, a certain farm, or a particular strip of land, and not with intense personal lives. They had no passions but those echoed and deformed in words that adults spoke. Such a one 'avaricious,' another 'loose,' a third 'reliable.' I did not know that these people, figures and names less convincing, than the valley in which they lived, were troubled and that tempests of fear and passion raged in the windless afternoons. Spring, producing for me its sequence of amazement, exerted on cottage or farm, a dour pressure. Recurring seasons, instead of pointing the wonder of the valley, must have obscured it, and dulling senses, exclaiming "We have known this before," knew ever less. On the upland swallowing the wind, in our hamlet under the bluffs, at Moisson across the river, many met with distrust or apathy the seasonal changes that a child watched enthralled.

Even at Chantemesle time was an enemy. The hamlet like all places of habitation was under siege. For the garrison there were only sorties: a movement, camouflaged by green boughs, to secure the cherry crop; in September scattered spies setting out with dogs to bring in partridges; now and then the capture of new soil by the plough, rewarded with the ribbon of the *Mérite agricole*; on the square at Moisson once a year the pulsing merry-go-round and strident booths, celebrating the triumph and martyrdom of our patron saint, the only inhabitant to have escaped safely through the enemy

Mademoiselle Firmin

lines ; or, the bravest and most desperate show, a white table set with bottles of wine under the walnut trees by the river to mark a marriage. But the hamlet was invested and the siege continued. The green valley was at once a defence and the terrain across which the treacherous seasons advanced. Their passage paralysed and killed, or, more cruelly, hid life behind ever-thickening barriers of experience.

I could not know this. The young understand pain, but are as untouched by tragedy as the innocent by vice. I watched mere event ; at Moisson the cripple with dangling legs swinging slowly down the street on crutches ; Madame Bertrand weeping, her jaunty son done to death in a Paris flat ('il avait des mauvaises fréquentations,' the sinister phrase remains) ; Raoul slumping behind his counter, struck with an apoplexy ; and the end of Mademoiselle Firmin.

The Firmins were our closest neighbours. The dispirited father, a widower who wore carpet slippers even in the garden, had in some prosperous and distant time built a villa on the island opposite us. He had intended a pleasaunce, but in his retirement was constrained to live there the year round. His daughter kept house for him. Mademoiselle Firmin, a shrunk breastless woman of fifty with a black moustache that showed against the extreme whiteness of her skin, was intelligent. It was the unripened sad intelligence of one whom life had not taken into account. Her gestures were tentative and she had a habit of swallowing before she spoke which drew attention to a stringy neck. She dressed in the unsuitable black clothes which in those days ladies of the French upper-middle class dared not discard even on a green island. *Les Nénuphars* was a pleasant cool house in summer, and as my canoe drifted past I often heard the sound of the mower on the shaded lawns 'spiriting its little fountain of vivid green.' A garden on an island meant that close to the banks one could shoot under trailing sprays of bloom. Ripe fruits plopped into the water. As they bobbed down the current, you could put out a hand and grab sopping pears and plums. Shafts of sunlight aimed through the leaves fell on flowers that were surprisingly bright. The tree-trunks, fringing the banks like an open-work screen, seemed to drift and move only less swiftly than my canoe. As they alternately hid and revealed bits of the garden, the same clump of flowers

would reappear half a dozen times, and each time would seem a fresh clump of flowers.

In winter it was different. The deserted river hurried by, the lush vegetation was gone, and the island grew dank and mournful. When the trees lost their leaves, the villa stood marooned among the empty flower-beds, its windows looking sadly across the current towards the life of the mainland. Sometimes both house and garden vanished, wrapped in the uneasy mists that clung to the river. When the vapour lifted, it left them wringing wet as though bathed in a cold perspiration. From trees and bushes there was a steady drip, drip, into the grey water. For weeks at this season the only news from the island was the clanging bell that summoned their boatman to the landing-stage when Mademoiselle Firmin went shopping at Vétheuil. As he ferried her over in a shifting mist, the skimpy black figure would be half-perceived, sitting ghost-like in the stern. It seemed that wisps of mist still clung to her as she climbed with shopping-bag into the tired Léon-Bollet. Undoubtedly the winters were not easy at *Les Nénuphars*.

The old man died one February, and my parents in the months that followed, acknowledging the duty of neighbours, asked Mademoiselle Firmin over to Chantemesle more frequently than they would otherwise have done. They derived little pleasure from her visits. Sitting uneasily in the drawing-room, she presented a blanched face that managed to be both sad and uncommunicative. There was no appeal for sympathy. At tea she ate only a single small sandwich, and this with an appearance of effort as though digestion were difficult. After an hour's talk of local affairs, she would take up her bag, give a brief shake to her black dress, and go. Until the leaves again thickened on the trees, we would see her sitting upright as the boatman rowed her across to the villa.

Bathing at Chantemesle belonged to the ritual of summer. The Seine below Paris is never better than a dubious greyish-green, but to us children it seemed cool and welcoming. At first with a grown-up in attendance and later on our own, three or four of us would take out the blunt-nosed rowing-boat, the familiar craft of Seine fishermen. Leaning over the sides, clambering on to the prow, never still, we must have looked, as we drew out from the shore, like creatures caged

Mademoiselle Firmin

behind invisible bars, fretting for release into the cool element beneath us. There must also have been a repeated echoing across the water as we shouted and laughed. When we all broke free and our voices were quenched, diving it seemed simultaneously and at a preconcerted signal, there was a brief surprising silence. Then the commotion that had been in the sunlight was transferred to the water. At once, as if there were a submarine disturbance, it became aswirl, eddying, spouting, and throwing ripples against the side of the boat. Our favourite bathing-place was off the end of the Firmins' island, and sometimes in the summer which I now recall we would find Mademoiselle Firmin under her parasol watching our antics from the lawn, intently and it seemed with envy. "Come and join us, Mademoiselle Firmin," we shouted, thinking it a great joke. She only waved. A moment later she had disappeared among the trees and the river was ours again.

It was late in the season when she announced, as though it were wholly natural: "Perhaps I shall accept your invitation. It would be nice to bathe again. I used once to swim a good deal at Trouville." We did not take her seriously, until a note arrived for my mother. When, Mademoiselle Firmin asked, was the next bathing party and might she join the children? My mother replied with diffidence, since it seemed a responsibility to commit this pale woman to the water, but said we should be bathing next day after tea. To tea Mademoiselle Firmin came, carrying with circumspection, as though it were precious, an embroidered bag which contained her bathing-suit and wrap. She put it beside her chair on the terrace where the table was set in the shade of the apricot tree. When my father teasingly called her a *sportive*, she turned with so pained an expression and an involuntary gesture of such distaste that it took us aback. "Now, children, don't eat too much," said my mother to change the conversation. "It's not good for you before bathing. You can have some cake afterwards." It was indeed too hot to eat much; a sweltering day that offered little breeze even on the terrace. We had soon finished. But Mademoiselle Firmin did not finish. When the last sandwich had disappeared and the macaroons, she turned to one of the cook's great layered cakes whose richness compelled even the respect of children. We watched her in fascinated

amazement. Usually so difficult and dainty, she attacked the food with determination, carrying morsel after morsel with short rapid motions to the pursed mouth that opened and closed, opened and closed, with mechanical obedience. One huge slice disappeared, a second, and then a third, and when each was finished she drew a mauve cambric handkerchief from her bag and wiped a rime of chocolate from her thin lips. Though she ate avidly, it was with such evident distaste, as someone performing a set task, that we children who had been on the verge of giggles were silenced. While we stared, my mother tried to keep up polite conversation. Made-moiselle Firmin answered at random, her chops moving steadily, her eyes fixed somewhere on the hillside above. It was with an effort that she brought them back to the table, appraised the diminished cake, and cut a fourth slice. Even for her strong purpose this proved too much. She took a bite and then with a look of nausea pushed her plate away. A moment later, with the air of someone whose work is finished, she gave the customary shake to her black dress and stood up. "Such a delicious tea, but I am afraid my appetite has kept you . . . I am ready whenever the children are ; and, I hope, on this first occasion I am to have the pleasure of taking them out alone."

She was a long time undressing in the boathouse. My father had predicted a period costume, something striped with frills and pantaloons, such as was usual before the First World War. When she appeared it was in a new bathing-dress. A size too large, and no doubt chosen for this reason, its black serge hung in wrinkles ; yet probably never before in her retired life had she exposed so much of her body. There were blue veins below her thighs, and her legs were straight, almost without calf. We were obscurely sorry for her, but as children scrutinised her with impersonal interest. Stepping into the boat she stumbled and it rocked, sending ripples over the dry round discs of the waterlilies. Though the trees were already throwing shadows across the water, it was deliciously warm, a tranquil evening. The thwarts where we sat in our bathing-slips retained a sensuous warmth from the long day's sun. "Well, children," she said with a painful smile, "here we are." She shivered. "Elle a la frousse," someone whispered, "tu va voir elle ne se baignera pas."

Mademoiselle Firmin

We drifted out on the current, taking a pull at the oars from time to time to keep us straight. As so often before, we anchored just below the Firmin island. The water downstream shone in the slanting sunlight, smooth and polished, giving no hint of its opaque depths or of the tons of silt, and worse, that it was carrying seaward. For us it was tantalising with its promise of exertion and pleasure. "Come on, Mademoiselle Firmin," we said, and half showing off we plunged, shattering the gleaming surface in quick succession. A moment later we were looking back at the boat expectantly. She had not moved. With arms crossed over her chest and her hands on her shoulders, as though she were cold or over modest, she seemed to be thinking. Later we saw her lower herself slowly down the steps that hung from the stern of the boat. Then, giving a self-conscious wave, she launched out and began to swim deliberately downstream. She had a curious old-fashioned action and held her chin high as if she could not bear the dirty water to touch her hair. The head bobbed away from us at each stroke, moving into the swifter current. It looked out of place, sedate and formal, with the greying hair piled on top and the white neck that seemed never to have known the sun. It drew sedately away and then, as we watched, it was gone. We waited for it to reappear. Heads we knew always reappeared, the face spluttering and wreathed in smiles.

The end of Mademoiselle Firmin was a curious disconcerting episode that left us startled and trembling for a day or two. Hearing someone say her death was 'the best thing that could have happened,' we wondered; but we missed the tragedy and a sense of the grey years that had preceded. It was not long before we were bathing again elsewhere in the river, and in the following summer we returned to our favourite stretch below the Firmin island. It was the best place we knew.

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